

CHAMPS! The Red Wings kiss the Cup

Sporting News

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

What we
learned when
we went
bear hunting
with

**the baddest
defensive
lineman
in the NFL**

The Vikings'
Jared Allen

**THE NBA
FINALS**
The Kid
shall lead
them

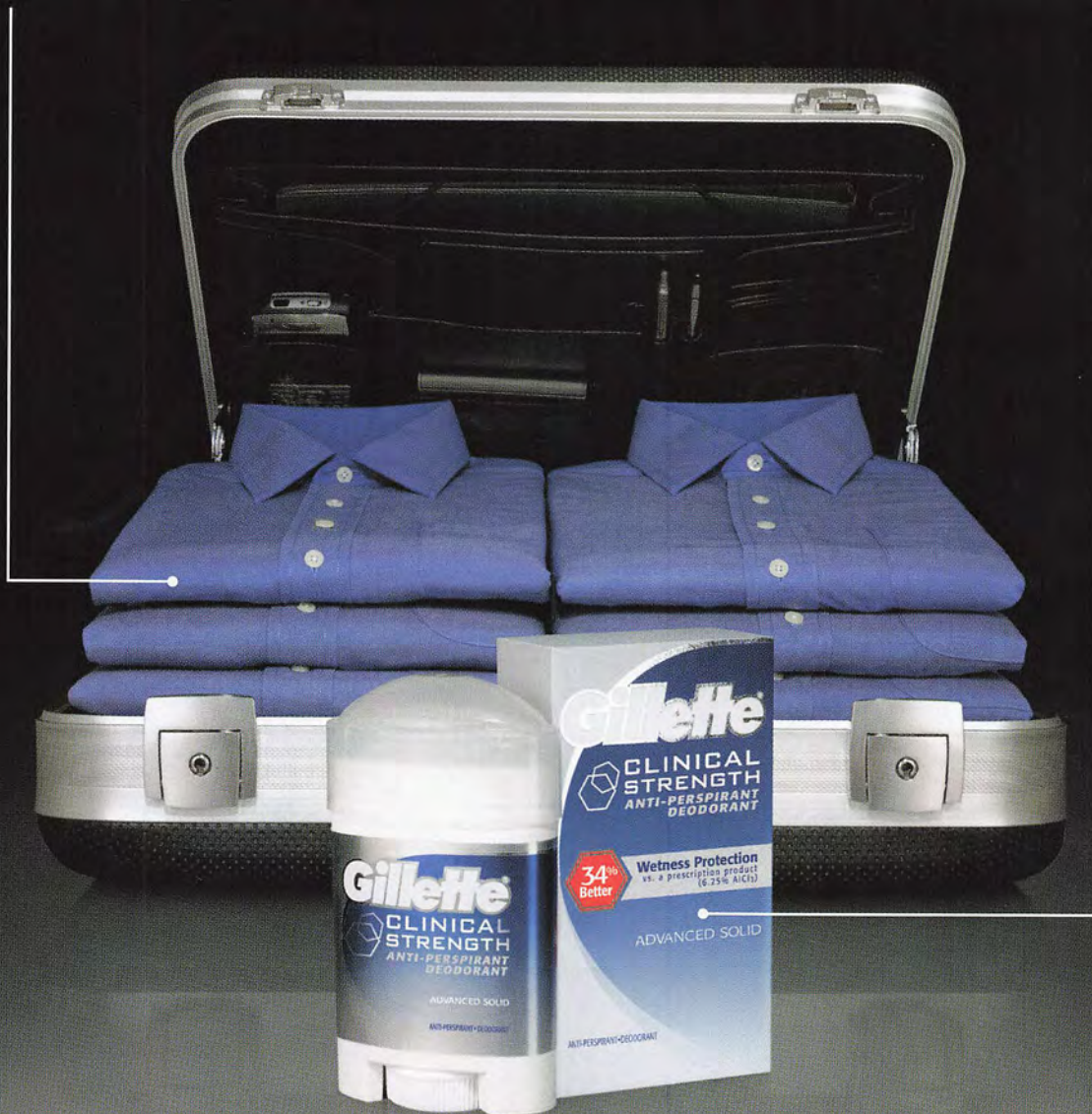
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MAGAZINE

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10 'It never gets old'

For many Red Wings, that championship feeling isn't anything new. But that doesn't mean a sip or two from this year's Cup is any less sweet. *By Ted Kulfan*

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Kevin Garnett has brought the Celtics close to a title with his dogged defense of the paint, but getting close to the real K.G. can be tough: He guards his privacy with the same ferocity. *By Stan McNeal*

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Whether it's a red stag in New Zealand or a quarterback in New England, Vikings defensive end Jared Allen craves the thrill of the hunt and the hunt of the thrill. Put on your best camouflage and come along on his greatest adventure: bear hunting in Idaho. *By Mike Nahrstedt*

> **COLLEGE FOOTBALL**

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Tim Tebow has captured the eyes and ears of people at home and across the globe since winning the Heisman Trophy. *By Matt Hayes*



16

Get to know K.G.?
Sorry, Boston fans, he's
wicked private.

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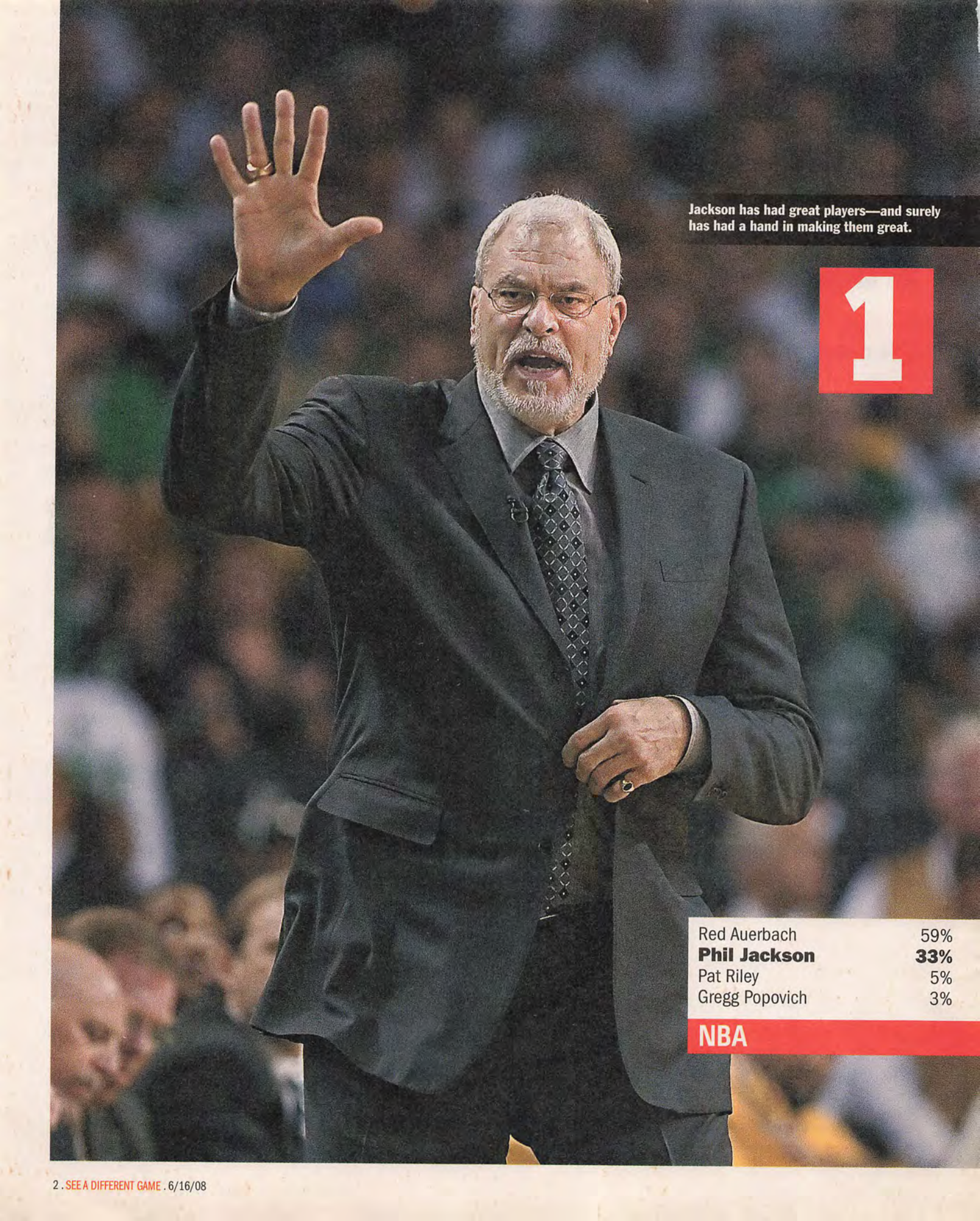
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Jackson has had great players—and surely
has had a hand in making them great.

1

Red Auerbach	59%
Phil Jackson	33%
Pat Riley	5%
Gregg Popovich	3%

NBA

TO KNOW LIST

5 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

THE MAIN EVENT

The Sultan of Staples

A Lakers championship would constitute more than a return to pre-eminence for the NBA's most popular franchise. It also would give Phil Jackson one for the *other* thumb—his 10th ring as a head coach, breaking a tie with Red Auerbach for the most ever.

In Los Angeles—where no one doubts John Wooden, the 97-year-old Wizard of Westwood, is the greatest coach in basketball history—Jackson's 10th title might be considered proof that he is the best to prowl an NBA sideline.

Basketball fans at large probably would require more convincing (see graphic).

And that's OK, because Jackson vs. Auerbach is an argument that is here to stay.

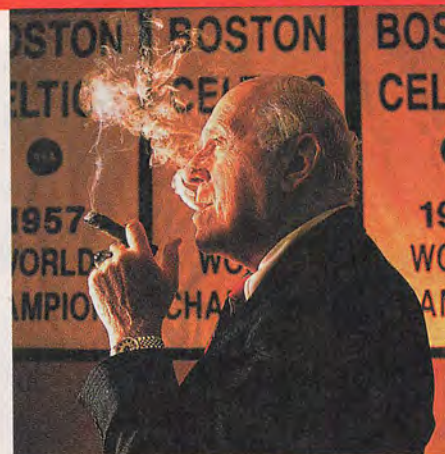
"Phil obviously is a good coach. You don't win

that many games without being a good coach," Auerbach said in 2005, a year before his death. "One thing, though: He's been very fortunate. He picks his spots. That's all I can say."

So put Auerbach in the camp of critics who believe Jackson's championship legacy has been defined not by the philosophizer-coach's intellectualism and provocative thinking but by Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant.

If you are in that same camp, just ask yourself this: Are those four players innately prone to winning in a way that Bill Russell, Bob Cousy, John Havlicek and Sam Jones weren't?

Believe it or not, there was a time when critics charged that anyone could win with the likes of



The smoke may never completely clear on Red vs. Phil—which is, of course, the beauty of any good sports argument.

Lew Alcindor, Bill Walton, Gail Goodrich and Sidney Wicks. But Wooden didn't just win—he won it all more times than anyone else before or since.

Ten times, to be precise.

Any way you slice it, that's one more than nine. —Steve Greenberg

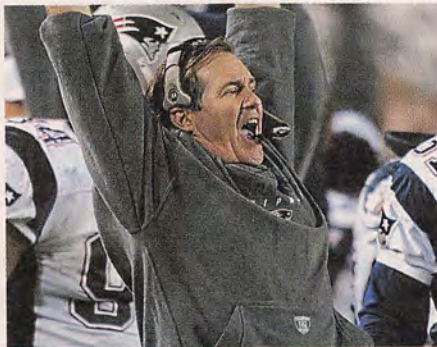
You made the call

How SportingNews.com members voted on the top four bench bosses in each pro sport



MLB

Casey Stengel	48%
Joe Torre	20%
Walter Alston	18%
Joe McCarthy	14%



NFL

Vince Lombardi	43%
Bill Walsh	36%
Chuck Noll	13%
Bill Belichick	8%



NHL

Scotty Bowman	72%
Toe Blake	14%
Al Arbour	10%
Glen Sather	4%

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2

WOULDN'T \$17 HAVE WORKED JUST FINE?

The price tag on Kevin Garnett's Adidas Signature Team Commander sneakers: \$1,017 a pair, with eight new pairs hitting the market after each game of the NBA Finals. Garnett helped design them to commemorate Boston's bid for a 17th league title.



4

QUICK CLICKS
Hello ... Newman

The NASCAR season is turning into the homestretch as drivers do whatever they can to speed into one of those 12 coveted spots in the Chase for the Sprint Cup. If you're looking for a little inside info, check out alltelracing.com for Ryan Newman's biweekly podcast, in which he and host Brett McMillan talk about racing and interview special guests. Newman, this year's Daytona 500 champ, is firmly on the fence, sitting in 14th place but just 10 points out of 12th heading into Sunday's race at Michigan.



Posey is a giant at—and behind—the dish for Florida State.

3

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: COLLEGE WORLD SERIES

Catchers on the rise

Eight battle-tested college baseball teams survived a grueling regular season, a round of pool play to open the 2008 national tournament and a best-of-three super regional round. Their reward, as always, is a trip to middle America for the College World Series, which starts Saturday at Rosenblatt Stadium in Omaha, Neb.

For the players, it's a chance to win a championship and achieve some sort of baseball immortality. For fans of major league baseball, it's a chance to see some of this year's top draft picks. Buster Posey, the Florida State catcher who went No. 5 overall to the Giants, will be the highest pick to show his wares on the college game's biggest stage. Stanford's Jason Castro, picked 10th by the Astros, is another catcher to watch.

A new champion will be crowned—two-time defending champ Oregon State didn't qualify this year. —Ryan Fagan



5

IT BEARS REPEATING
'Let's just say if I was a life insurance salesman, I wouldn't find him to be an incredibly good risk.'

—Boston College law professor Robert M. Bloom to the Boston Herald on the danger Patriots lineman Nick Kaczur could face after being exposed last week as an informant for the Drug Enforcement Administration

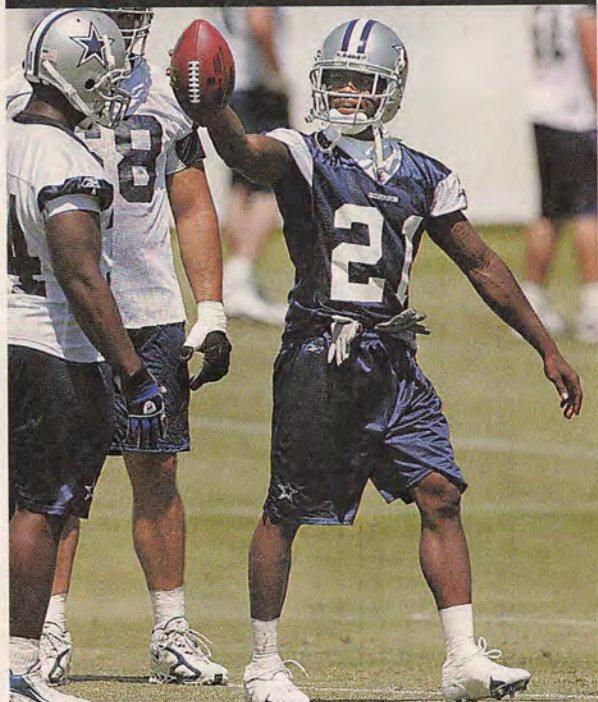
Kaczur

ON DECK

All times Eastern

The week ahead in sports

PICK of the WEEK



Now returning to the playing field: Pacman Jones.

TUE 17

The **Cowboys, Bucs and Packers** open minicamp, and there are a bazillion story lines to choose from, at least for the Pack and Cowboys. I don't know what I think about Adam Jones' return to the game, but I certainly wish he played for Green Bay, if only so Pacman and Atari Bigby could play in the same secondary.

SUN 15 The final round of the **U.S. Open** will be on for six hours (3 p.m., NBC), the first time the Open has been scheduled to conclude in prime time. Even when the course is not preparing for the U.S. Open, the rough and greens at Torrey Pines are unnecessarily mean, as though the greenskeeper personally hates each and every golfer. When the big boys get there, the course will be a nightmare.

MON 16 The top team in the A.L. East meets the top team in the N.L. East as the **Red Sox visit the Phillies** (7 p.m., ESPN). These teams have something else in common: Terry Francona. The Boston skipper managed the Phillies for four unimpressive seasons (1997-2000).

WED 18 It must be excruciating for Cubs fans as they wait for their team to come up with a distinct way to blow this thus-far charmed season. But here's their chance: **The Cubs play their first-ever series in Tampa Bay**, so they have an entirely new way to swoon. Game 2 will be televised (7 p.m., WGN).

THU 19 It's the second round of the **College World Series** (7 p.m., ESPN). The second-round winners must win two more games to make the three-game finals (June 23-25).

—Matt Crossman

BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 The NBA Finals. You can't help but be stoked about this series, so I say to Hal in Accounting, "I loved Bird and Magic." He says: "If you're talking animal acts, nothing beats Siegfried and Roy."

2 The Red Wings. They lifted the Cup again. Good thing. If Detroit had lost, the city was going to start going by "Bad NFL Draft Town."

3 The NFL. A Patriots offensive lineman helped the DEA in a sting operation. Please, Lord, tell me they didn't have him secretly videotape the bad guys.

4 O.J. Mayo. The latest is that the feds are investigating whether tax laws were broken in an alleged pay-for-play scandal at USC. The tipoff: The agent's runner filed his 1040EZ with a shoebox full of unmarked \$100s.

5 The U.S. Open. The buzz—outside of Tiger's comeback—is whether anyone will finish under par in San Diego, excluding the Padres, of course.

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YOUR TURN

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Notre Dame is *always* overrated (SN, June 2). It will take a miracle of biblical proportions for the Irish to even have a winning season, but they still will be trumped up by the media. —*alakin via SportingNews.com*

■ Maybe you should start with a larger number next time you make a list of the most overrated college football teams. You left off Michigan, Notre Dame, Texas A&M, UCLA and Oregon. —*weathersusa via SportingNews.com*

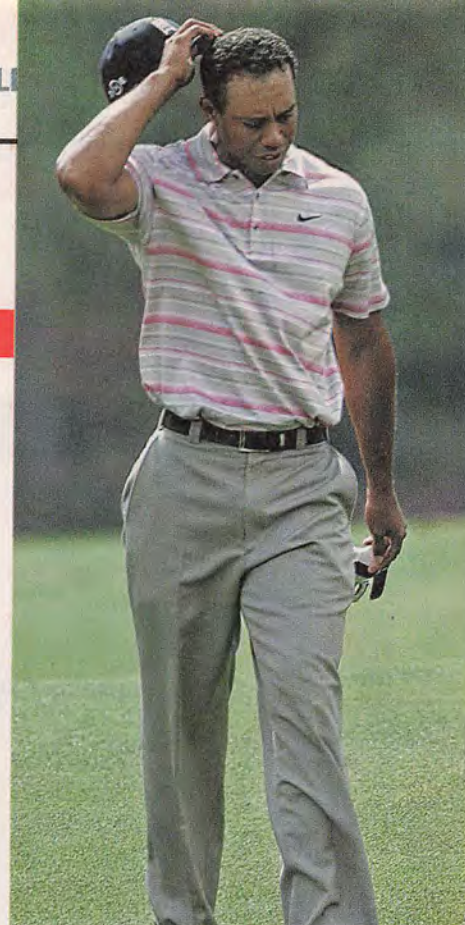
■ Clemson is one of those teams that always seems like it has everything going for it but then finds a way to lose. In a weak conference like the ACC, I always like Clemson's chances, but it is always flirting with the big letdown. —*Spartan-Beta via SportingNews.com*

■ I wish the NBA awards (SN, June 2) weren't judged exclusively on one year. Coaches who turn around their teams (and executives who do the same) are always favored over those who display steady brilliance. Byron Scott is a good choice, but Sam Mitchell last year? Give it to Jerry Sloan, Phil Jackson or Gregg Popovich. Those are the truly great coaches. —*Dagstyle via SportingNews.com*

■ I agree with everything except the rookie of the year. I thought Al Horford was more consistent than Kevin Durant. He also led the Hawks to the playoffs and helped them almost take down the Celtics! —*BPC2434 via SportingNews.com*

■ Let Jason Taylor walk (SN, June 2). After all, at 1-15 last year, exactly how much will the Dolphins miss him? —*Boomer19gems via e-mail*

■ Let's see where the Rays (SN, June 2) are come August and September, when the games really matter and the best teams have made their push to the top. Anyone who thinks Boston and New York will be looking up at the Rays by then is foolish. Oh, sure, Tampa's early success is a nice story, but I have zero faith in the team maintaining the roll it's on. Eventually, the Rays will run out of steam and fall to the back of the pack in the A.L. East. —*Flash-jeff via SportingNews.com*



Go ahead, Tiger—prove us wrong.

POLLING PLACE

Will Tiger Woods win the U.S. Open?

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40% Yes No 60%

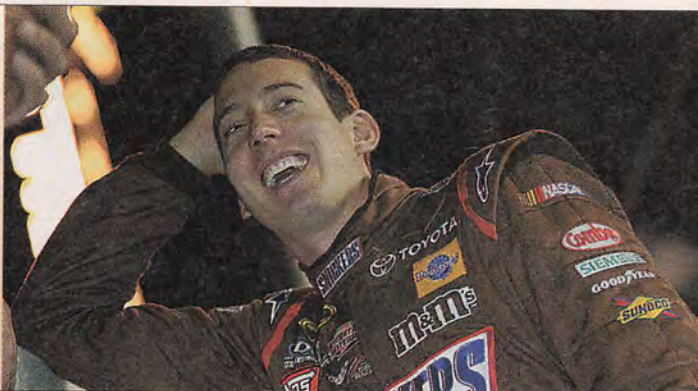
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GMC WE ARE PROFESSIONAL GRADE.

Posted by **texasadlerfan**

The Dale Earnhardt Jr. Show, starring **Kyle Busch** ... what's wrong with this picture?

The most popular driver in NASCAR has yet to win a race this season in spite of running well, achieving goals expressed by his crew chief and becoming a probable Chase contender.



Meanwhile, the most unpopular driver in NASCAR continues to whip the heck out of a field of superstars backed by superlative teams, quality engineering, technical expertise, unlimited funding and previous successes.

To see more of *texasadlerfan's* blog, and many others, visit **SPORTINGBLOGS** at sportingnews.com.

TECH SUPPORT

More foot injuries? Not on his turf

He's a 25-year-old mechanical engineer who hasn't rushed a yard in his life.

But the machine Seth Kuhlman built could provide the NFL with some of the most comprehensive information available on how and why turf-related injuries occur and whether changes in footwear or artificial turf could result in fewer injuries for NFL players.

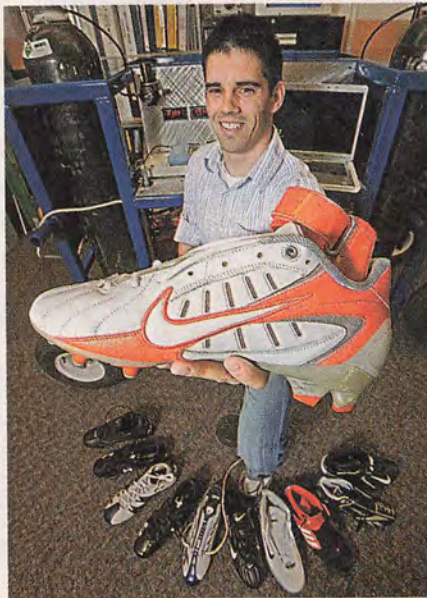
The NFL gave Boise State researchers a \$115,000 grant last year for the project. Kuhlman designed and built the machine in a lab that sits about 500 miles from the nearest NFL stadium. "We just happened to have the facilities here," he says.

This month, an NFL Injury and Safety subcommittee will see the device for the first time.

League trainers and physicians are looking to prevent some of the most common foot and ankle injuries among players, primarily high-ankle sprains and turf toe, an ailment involving joint tears, swelling and intense pain often linked to playing on artificial surfaces.

The machine, about the size of a small U-Haul trailer, holds two tanks of compressed gas that are used to operate a series of levers. A metal rod running through the center of the machine is fitted with a Size 12 cleated shoe.

With a laptop, Kuhlman can swivel the metal ankle joint and switch the shoe position. He can simulate a football player's body weight and use pressurized gas to copy the force a player exerts on turf while running. He can measure the ankle bend when the shoe makes contact with the ground. Too much bend indicates a



possible injury.

Artificial surfaces have been around since the 1960s, first installed in the Houston Astrodome and called AstroTurf. Those original playing surfaces were essentially a synthetic carpet laid over a thin rubber pad installed on top of a slab of concrete. Stadium turf now consists of individual blades of polyethanol fibers woven into a padded backing filled with sand or rubber pellets, sometimes a mixture of both. About half of the 31 NFL stadiums use artificial surfaces, according to the turf industry's Atlanta-based trade group, the Synthetic Turf Council.

"It looks and plays like natural grass," says Stanley Green, president of the Pennsylvania-based Sprinturf company, which announced a deal with the Kansas City Chiefs in February.

Kuhlman's quirky machine could prevent future athletes from suffering turf injuries.

Manufacturers say the synthetic fields are cheaper to maintain and safer for players. But Dr. Michael Coughlin, co-chairman of the NFL subcommittee on foot and ankle injuries, contends the new playing surfaces may create more of a risk for ankle and foot injuries.

"We have some preliminary information that leads us to believe that there may be a higher injury rate on the newer infill surfaces compared to grass," Coughlin says.

Researchers are scheduled to test the device in Seattle, San Francisco and Dallas this summer. —Wire services



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1 The Shot—June 14, 1998

The man: Michael Jordan

The matchup: Bulls vs. Jazz, Game 6 of The NBA Finals

The moment: I'm going to need that ball, Karl Malone. Uh, get out of my way, Bryon Russell. Let me just hang here awhile as I drain the final shot of my career (for now).

2 The Tackle—January 30, 2000

The man: Mike Jones

The matchup: Rams vs. Titans, Super Bowl 34

The moment: Roughly 99 percent of the world dreams of scoring a touchdown to win the Super Bowl. Linebackers like Jones dream of making an open-field tackle at the 1-yard line on the final play of the game.

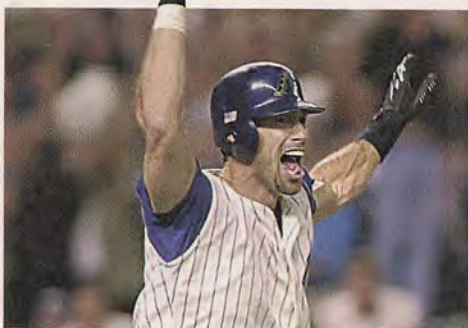


3 The Blooper—November 4, 2001

The man: Luis Gonzalez

The matchup: Diamondbacks vs. Yankees, Game 7 of the World Series

The moment: Bottom of the ninth. One out. Bases loaded. Mariano Rivera on the bump. Under these incredible circumstances, Gonzo inside-outed the ball—more like *oopsed* it—over Derek Jeter's head to take down the defending champs.



5 in 10

On the anniversary of M.J.'s 'last' shot, the greatest, most incredible, you-may-never-see-that-again championship-clinching moments of the past decade



4 The Rebound—June 19, 1999

The man: Brett Hull

The matchup: Stars vs. Sabres, Game 6 of the Stanley Cup finals

The moment: "No goal!"? No dice. Hull smacked a Cup-clinching shot past Dominik Hasek to end a three-OT affair that wouldn't have been any more dramatic had Lindy Ruff beaten up Gary Bettman at center ice.



5 The Scamper—January 4, 2006

The man: Vince Young

The matchup: Texas vs. USC, BCS championship game

The moment: On fourth-and-5 from the Trojans' 8-yard line with less than half a minute to play, Young took a shotgun snap and outran the defense—for what seemed like the hundredth time—to the pylon.

—Steve Greenberg

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'It never gets old'

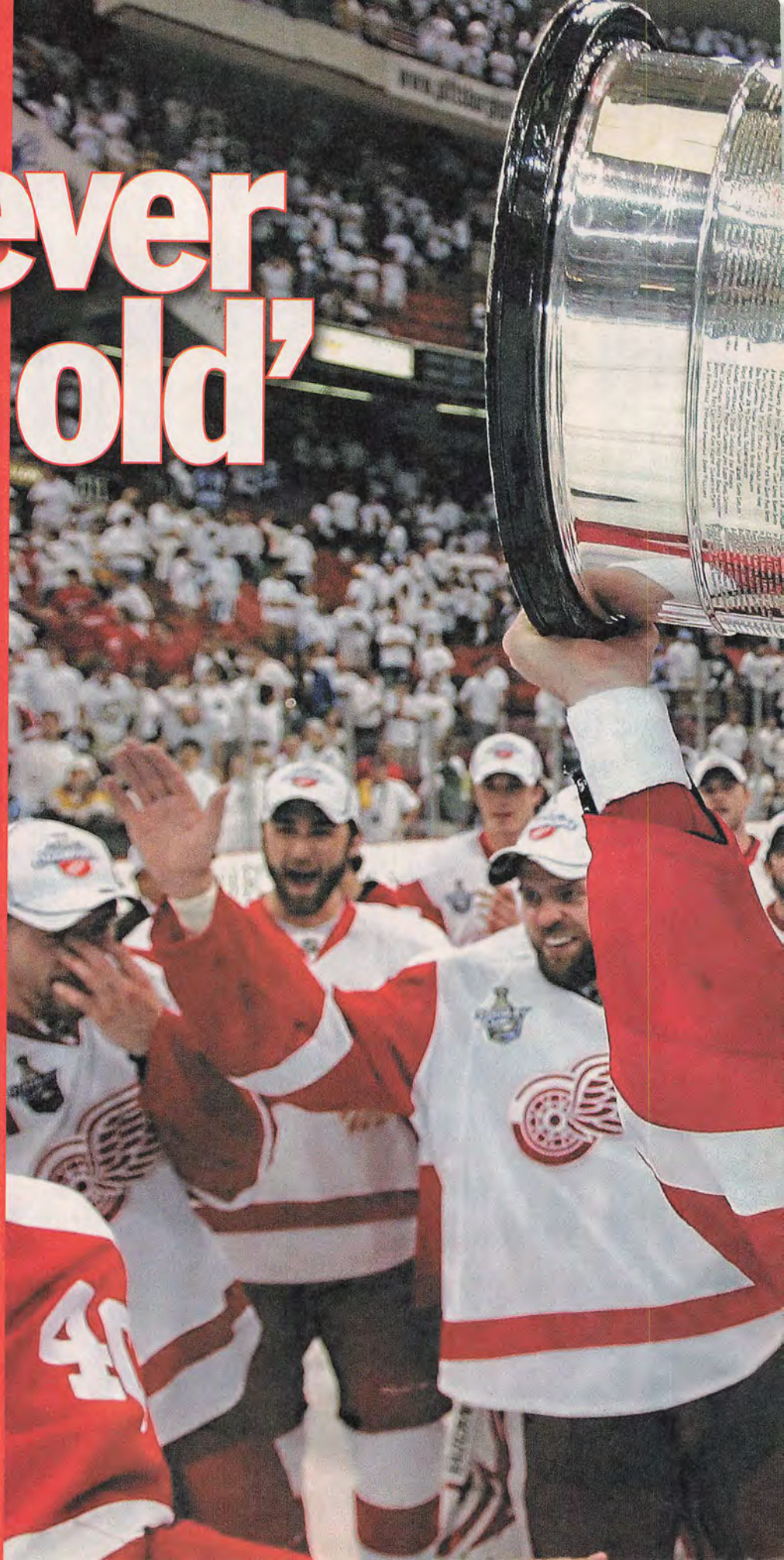
For many Red Wings, that championship feeling isn't anything new. But that doesn't mean a sip or two from this year's Cup is any less sweet. *By Ted Kulfan*

Husbands were looking for wives, kids were looking for their dads, and hockey players spread around Pittsburgh's Mellon Arena ice were looking for somebody—anybody—to hug.

At least the ones wearing red and white.

The Red Wings had just won the Stanley Cup with a thrilling 3-2 Game 6 victory over the Penguins. It was the fourth Cup in the past 12 years for the most successful hockey franchise in North America. And many of the Red Wings have become experts at this celebration thing.

For Kris Draper—and many of the Red Wings—the thrill that comes with hoisting the Cup wasn't an unfamiliar feeling.





STANLEY
CUP
2008

GENE J. RUSSELL

"But it never gets old—don't let anyone tell you that," left winger Kirk Maltby says.

Right winger Dallas Drake can only trust that sentiment. He returned this season to the city where he started his career 15 years ago. Now he has his first Stanley Cup win—in his first Cup finals series.

When team captain Nicklas Lidstrom hoisted the Cup, then turned and gave it to Drake, the emotion on Drake's hockey-scarred face would have melted the heart of the crustiest sports fan.

"This is a dream for any kid growing up in Canada or the United States," Drake says. "I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to lift that Cup. I tell you, though, it was heavy."

Drake paused for a second.

"I'm just blessed to be part of this team. What a team this is."

A new era

This one meant a little more.

That first Cup championship, back in 1997, ended a lot of frustration for players who had come so close before. But it was tempered a few

days later by the automobile accident that crippled defenseman Vladimir Konstantinov, who then became an inspirational focus for the second title a year later.

In 2002, general manager Ken Holland brought together a team that featured nine potential Hall of Famers. Those Red Wings were expected to win—and did. But this club, the Wings' first in the post-lockout salary cap era, has a special feel.

"Everyone anticipated with the salary cap we'd fall apart," owner Mike Ilitch says. "That's the thing that really drove us. That's why I'm a little more excited about this one. We haven't done it in six years."

From the start of the season, there was little doubt the Red Wings were the class of the NHL. The team took a lesson from a bitterly disappointing six-game Western Conference finals loss to Anaheim last spring, and an experienced group of veterans taught the younger players what it takes to win in the grueling NHL playoffs.

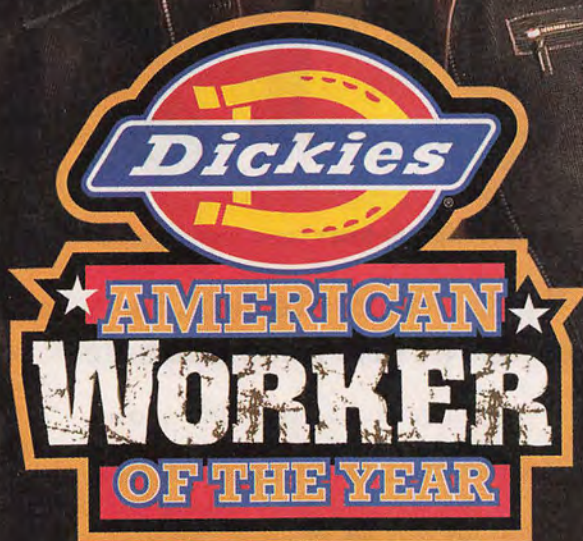
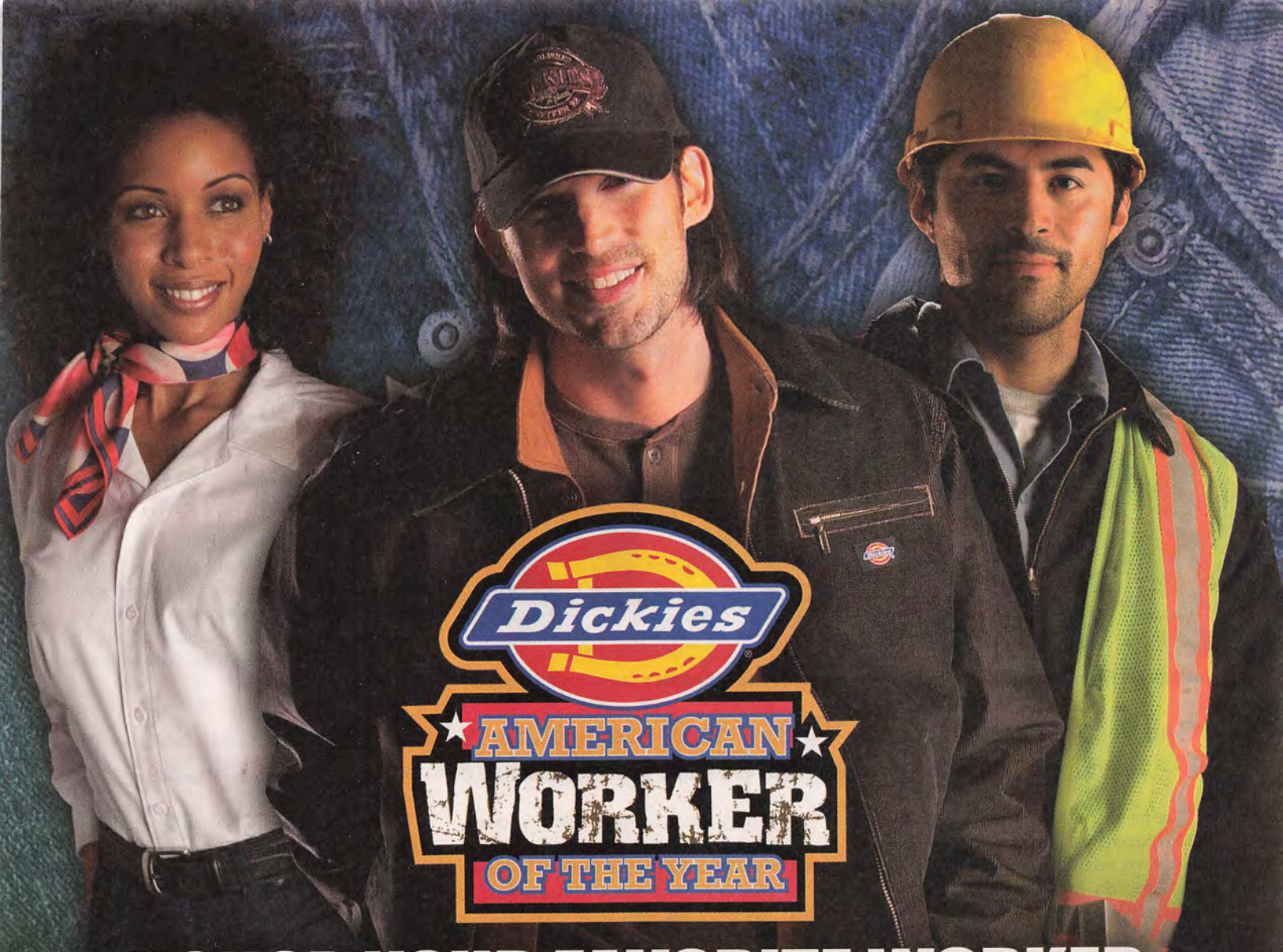
In the dramatic, entertaining and pulsating victory over the Penguins, youth joined hands with experience in a show of dominance.



Crosby put up impressive numbers, but Sid and the rest of the Penguins played like kids.



Chris Osgood (left) is a 14-year veteran, but not all of the Red Wings are old guys: Cleary and Conn Smythe winner Zetterberg are under 30.



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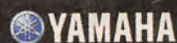
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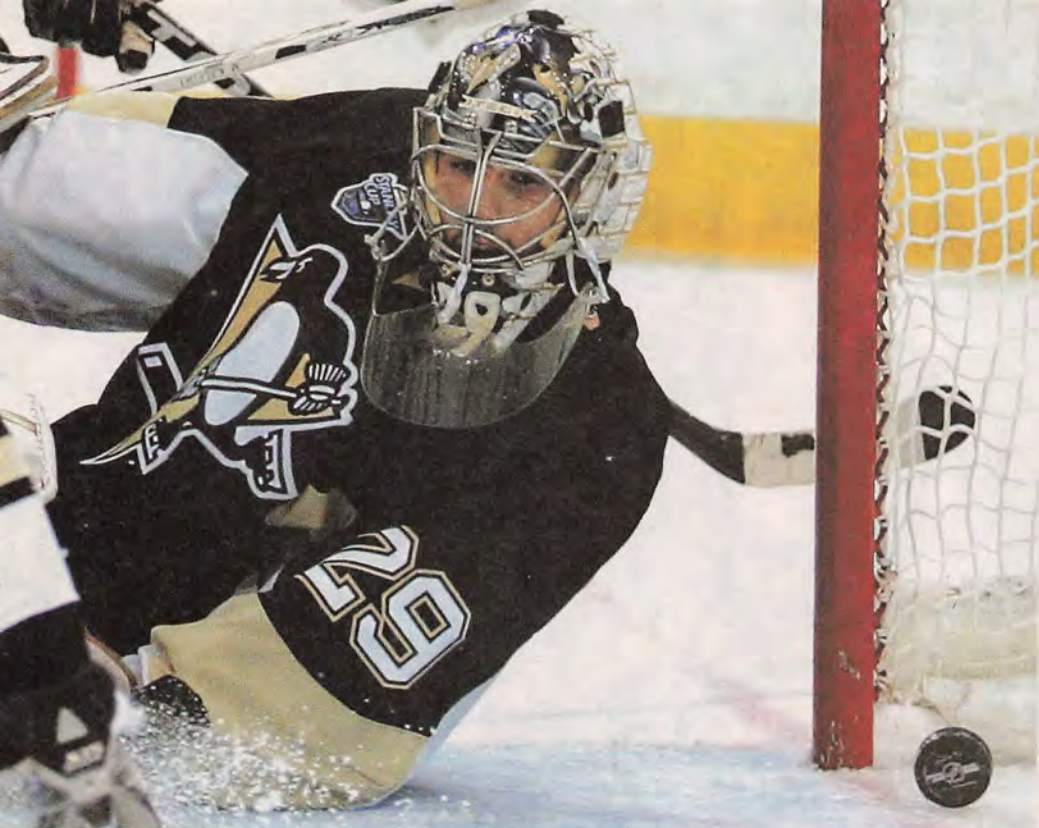
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Marc-Andre Fleury was brilliant in Game 5, but he couldn't stop Zetterberg's Cup-winner in Game 6.

to stack the roster with valuable role players (Johan Franzen, Valtteri Filppula, Niklas Kronwall) and picked up spare parts through tryouts and free agency (Samuelsson, Dan Cleary, Andreas Lilja). It all made for an interesting—and effective—mix.

"It shows that we're still able to play well with the new system," Lidstrom says. "People probably thought we were going to drop off a little bit going into that first season after the lockout, and the team didn't lose a beat."

The Red Wings dominated the Penguins on both ends of the ice throughout the finals, holding regular-season MVP finalist Evgeni Malkin without a goal until the last game of the series. Malkin, clearly humbled by the experience, told his translator that "we played against a great team."

The Babcock factor

Give coach Mike Babcock credit.

He arrived from Anaheim after the lockout, when Holland felt this team needed a stern voice from the outside. Babcock showed up with the reputation of hard-driving disciplinarian, and his first training camp suggested the characterization had merit.

'This year, it's been a process. It didn't happen overnight. We've been a good team, an elite, elite team for the last three years. And we were finally able to get it done.'—Red Wings coach Mike Babcock

"The journey started last year," Wings forward Mikael Samuelsson says. "We had a really good run at it. We weren't able to pull it off, but we got a lot of experience. It started off back then.

"We came into the finals really believing we could win."

No double trouble

Not only were the Wings the best team (115 points) during the regular season, they mirrored that success at the most important time of year. They lost six games in four playoff series, but they never were seriously challenged.

By securing both the Presidents' Trophy (league's best record) and the Stanley Cup, they became the seventh team to win both since the Presidents' Trophy was introduced 23 seasons ago.

"You always hear about how hard it is to go through the Cup after being the best team, winning the Presidents' Trophy," says Maltby, who is one of five Red Wings to play on all four Cup winners. "We did it once before, in '02, and we were just as confident this year. We knew we had to play well. It was going to be tough starting right with Round 1 with Nashville (a six-game victory). But we did it. We persevered, and we battled hard."

For defenseman Brad Stuart, like Drake, this was uncharted territory. Stuart was acquired from Los Angeles at the trading deadline and quickly realized the bar was set much higher in Detroit.

"When I got to realize how comfortable (everyone was) and how much confidence this group had in each other, that's when I knew that we had a real good shot," Stuart says. "I can't pinpoint the exact day when that was, but that's definitely the feeling that I got."

Wearing the cap well

The Wings had a payroll of almost \$80 million when they won the Stanley Cup in 2002. It was about \$50 million this time around—the product of salary cap-induced parity. Most league executives took delight in the fact big spenders would have a difficult time sustaining success.

So much for parity. The Red Wings simply changed their tactics.

They stole potential stars in the low rounds of the entry draft (Nicklas Lidstrom, Henrik Zetterberg, Pavel Datsyuk, Tomas Holmstrom), used other picks

Eventually, he gave in a little and found a middle ground with a mixture of players who already knew how to win and some youngsters who were being integrated into the lineup.



Draper's son wasn't around when he won his first Stanley Cup, but he got his hands on this one.

"It's difficult, obviously," says Babcock of the path to a Stanley Cup championship. "But if you go through the last three years in the NHL and the amount of games we've won, I mean, we won 58, we won 50, and we won 54.

"So do the math there. This year, it's been a process. It didn't happen overnight. We've been a good team, an elite, elite team for the last three years. And we were finally able to get it done."

Europeans rule

Maybe now, the myth that a team can have too many Europeans on its roster will be put to rest.

The Wings have seven Swedes, plus Datsyuk (Russia), Dominik Hasek and Jiri Hudler (Czech Republic) and Filpula (Finland). But all of those players were just as hungry as any North American to win a Stanley Cup.

Lidstrom became the first European to captain a Stanley Cup champion. Zetterberg was named playoff MVP, an award Lidstrom won in 2002.

"I've been over here for a long time, and I watched Steve Yzerman hoist (the Cup) three times in the past," Lidstrom says. "I'm very proud of being the first European. I'm very proud of

being a captain of the Red Wings. There's so much history with the team and great tradition."

For Zetterberg, it was another major step toward showing the league he is one of its premier talents. A finalist for the Selke Trophy as the NHL's best defensive forward, Zetterberg outplayed Penguins phenom Sidney Crosby at

both ends and tied Crosby for the playoff points lead with 27 (13 goals, 14 assists).

"There was a lot of talk there were too many Europeans on the club and we couldn't go all the way," says Zetterberg. "It was a great feeling to show everybody that we could do that, that we are winners."

Again.

SN



Lidstrom, one of the many Swedish Wings, became the first European-born captain to win a Stanley Cup.

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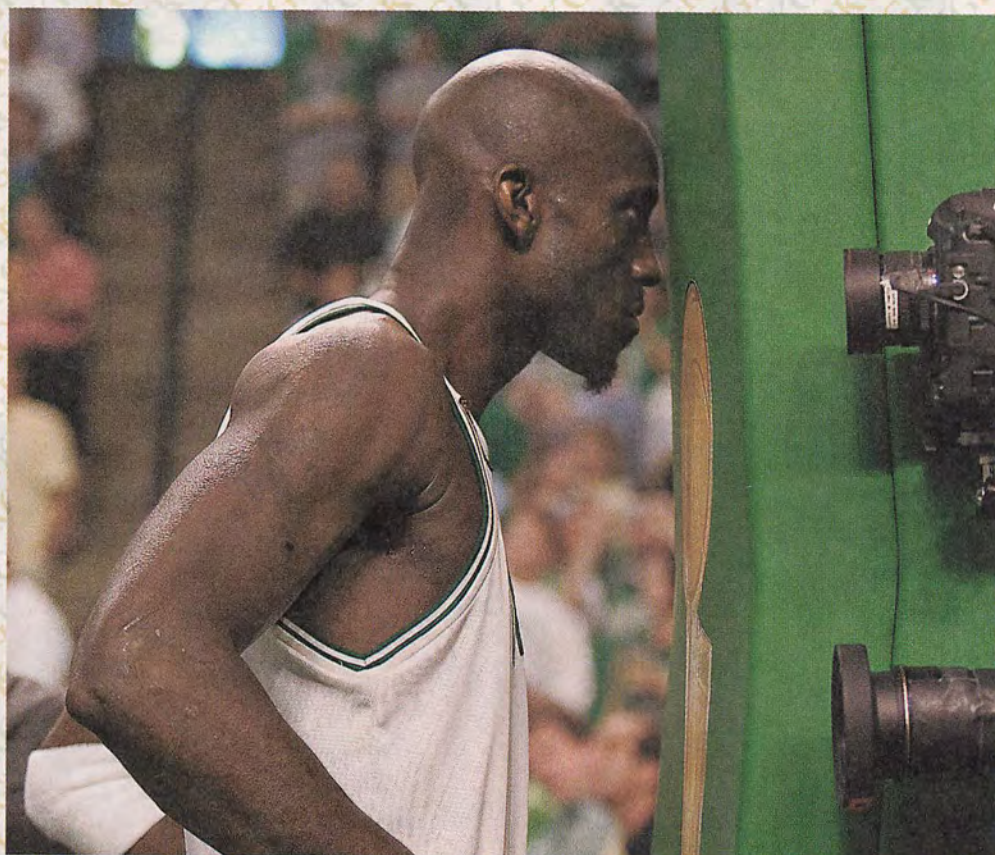
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NBA FINALS

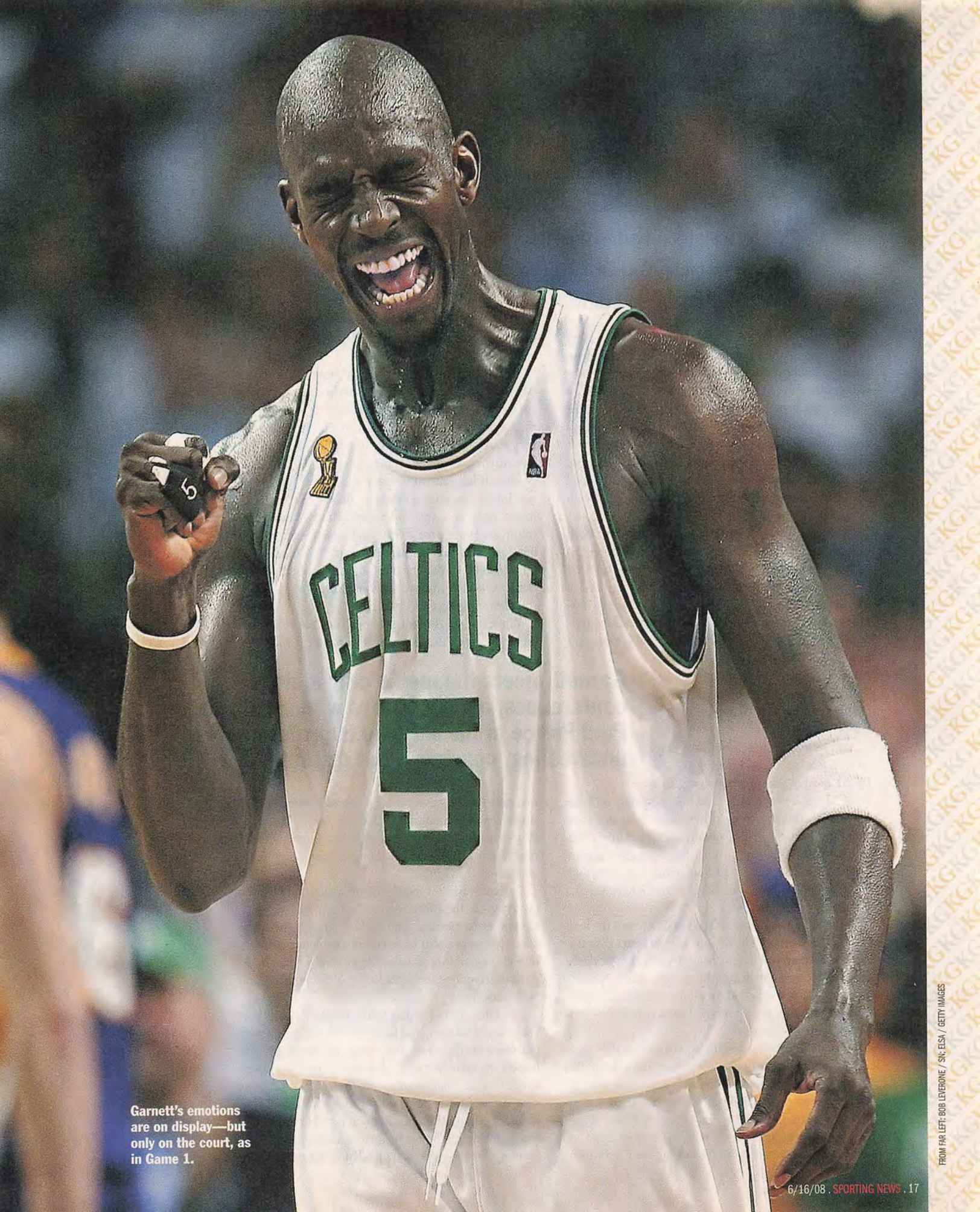
PURE INTENSITY



Garnett goes head to padding before each game, part of the pumping up process.

**Kevin Garnett has brought the Celtics close to a title
with his dogged defense of the paint,
but getting close to the real K.G. can be tough:
He guards his privacy with the same ferocity**

By Stan McNeal



Garnett's emotions are on display—but only on the court, as in Game 1.

Kevin Garnett never lets his guard down.

When James Taylor finishes singing the national anthem before Game 1 of The Finals, he passes the Celtics' bench as he walks off the court. Like his teammates, Garnett doesn't acknowledge Taylor with as much as a nod or a fist bump. Garnett doesn't even look up from his customary seat near the end of Boston's bench.

He is too focused on the task at hand. Before every home game, Garnett sits alone, head down, preparing to go to work. The arena goes dark and the amped-up production that precedes lineup introductions—featuring a closeup of Garnett in primal scream—goes up on the giant video board. During his ritual, Garnett exchanges a choreographed handshake with a teammate, gathers his fellow Celtics, adjusts his shorts and bangs his head against the basket stanchion. Thank goodness it's padded or the Celtics' best player would be starting the game with a headache.

Only Garnett knows whether his act is for show, born of superstition or, in fact, pure intensity. Whatever the reason, the buildup is working. Fueled from Day 1 by Garnett's fury and unselfishness, the Celtics are back in The Finals for the first time in 21 years. He came to Boston in a seven-for-one trade last summer because he figured the Celtics would give him his best shot at a championship. Before the series moved to Los Angeles, Garnett's reasoning looked sound as the Celtics moved within two victories of their first championship since 1984.

Anyone figuring the Celtics' early play-off struggles would carry over against the Lakers quickly was proved wrong. In a 98-88 Game 1 victory, they rode Garnett early and the 3-point shooting of Pierce—playing on a “sprained” knee after a third-quarter spill—late and dominated the Lakers on the boards. Apparently a quick healer, Pierce was even better in Game 2. He hit all four of his 3-pointers and finished with 28 points as the Celtics barely beat L.A., 108-102.

For the first two games of The Finals anyway, the best player in the league, Kobe Bryant, was not better than the Celtics' best players. Pierce outshot Bryant (61.5-40.1 percent) while nearly matching his production (27.0-25.0 ppg), and Garnett collected two double-doubles and pestered Lakers shooters so thoroughly that it seemed he was playing with broomsticks.

Garnett's intensity, versatility and steady-if-salty communication (he is the unofficial leader in use of a certain 12-letter word beginning with “M”) have been driving forces all season in making the Celtics the league's best defensive team. He won his first Defensive Player of the Year award not for personal stats (he ranked 22nd in blocked shots per game) but for helping the Celtics lead

the league in both opponents' field-goal and 3-point percentages.

As protective as Garnett, 32, has been of the Celtics' basket, he has been even stingier off the court. During an age in which athletes have good reason to be wary of the media, no one is warier than Garnett. He protects his privacy with the same intensity he uses trying to stop Bryant from driving around him on a pick-and-roll.

Garnett has refused virtually all requests for one-on-one interviews since arriving in Boston. He meets the media only in news conferences, almost always with teammate Paul Pierce at his side. Garnett is professional but unrevealing, courteous but distant. “We have written thousands of words about him since he got here,” veteran *Boston Globe* columnist Dan Shaughnessy says, “and we still know nothing about him.”

When his wife, Brandi, gave birth just before the play-offs and Garnett missed a couple of practices, the Celtics

Garnett meets the media only in news conferences, almost always with teammate Paul Pierce at his side. He is professional but unrevealing, courteous but distant.

said only that he was away for personal reasons. “Family issues are never public, so I ask (the media) to respect that,” Garnett told reporters after his return. “We still don't know if they had a boy or girl,” says one reporter who covers the Celtics.

Garnett works for the Celtics on community endeavors as long as the efforts involve “kids on the rise,” says a Celtics spokesperson. The Celtics knew when they acquired Garnett that he would not be volunteering for interviews, and they know when it's time to wrap up his group sessions because of the look he'll flash a media relations person.

Ask effusive rookie and fellow power forward Glen Davis about Garnett, and he says, “You see the intensity out there on the court, but he's a wonderful guy. He's helped me tremendously.” Ask for a specific example about Garnett's help—on or off the court—and Davis says, “He told me to never tell anybody your move.”

Garnett's guardedness is nothing new. He allowed the media inside his house for a behind-the-scenes story years ago but has worked to shield himself from attention



A dunk here, a defensive stop there and pretty soon you're talking a title that K.G. came to Boston for.

Q&A



In the lane—memory lane, that is—with Kareem

Except for some gray in his mustache, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 61, appears as trim and fit as he did 20 years ago when he was gracefully hoisting the most unstoppable shot in basketball history, the sky hook. Abdul-Jabbar, a special assistant with the Lakers, was considered sullen and distant during his playing days, but he has been at ease sharing his insights during *The Finals*.

SN: On the list of unbreakable records, where do you put your career scoring mark (38,387 points)?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It's not unbreakable. I thought Karl Malone would, but the odds caught up with him. The odds didn't catch up with me. I'm sure there'll be another person who's an offensive focus who will have the longevity I did. I would expect it to be a big man who plays closer to the hoop, where he takes high-percentage shots.

SN: Why didn't the odds catch up with you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I took care of myself physically, and I continued to be the offensive focus for a long time. I led my team in scoring in 1986, and I was 39 years old. I didn't realize at the time how remarkable that was.

SN: Are you glad the old Boston Garden was torn down?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No. I kind of liked the old Garden. My heroes played there. Bill Russell played there. Sam Jones played there. For me to go there and do well made me feel good. I loved winning the world championship there (in 1985). That was wonderful.

SN: What about the locker rooms?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Those were locker rooms? I thought they were storage rooms.

SN: How do you compare the atmosphere there to the new arena?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Celtics fans are still very knowledgeable, very rabid. They haven't changed at all. They're just in a bigger room.

SN: When you see the clip of you getting into Larry Bird's face in the 1984 Finals, can you believe you could get that angry?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Certainly I can relate to that because that was in response to what happened to Kurt Rambis. That was right after Kevin (McHale) tackled Kurt. Outrageous is not too strong a word to describe that. He could have injured him for life. You don't want to see your teammate taken down like that.

SN: In Game 1, Kevin Garnett fouled Kobe Bryant and somewhat gently put him on the floor. How did you view that?

ABDUL-JABBAR: What Kevin did was typical of somebody who is considering he has to stop the play, but he doesn't want to hurt somebody. I think it is appropriate.

SN: How different is that from your day?

ABDUL-JABBAR: From what I see, guys (today) are very serious about winning, but there's a certain line you don't cross. It's good that league officials have defined that line and everybody understands it in theory and in practice.

SN: Would that line have been crossed in your playing days?

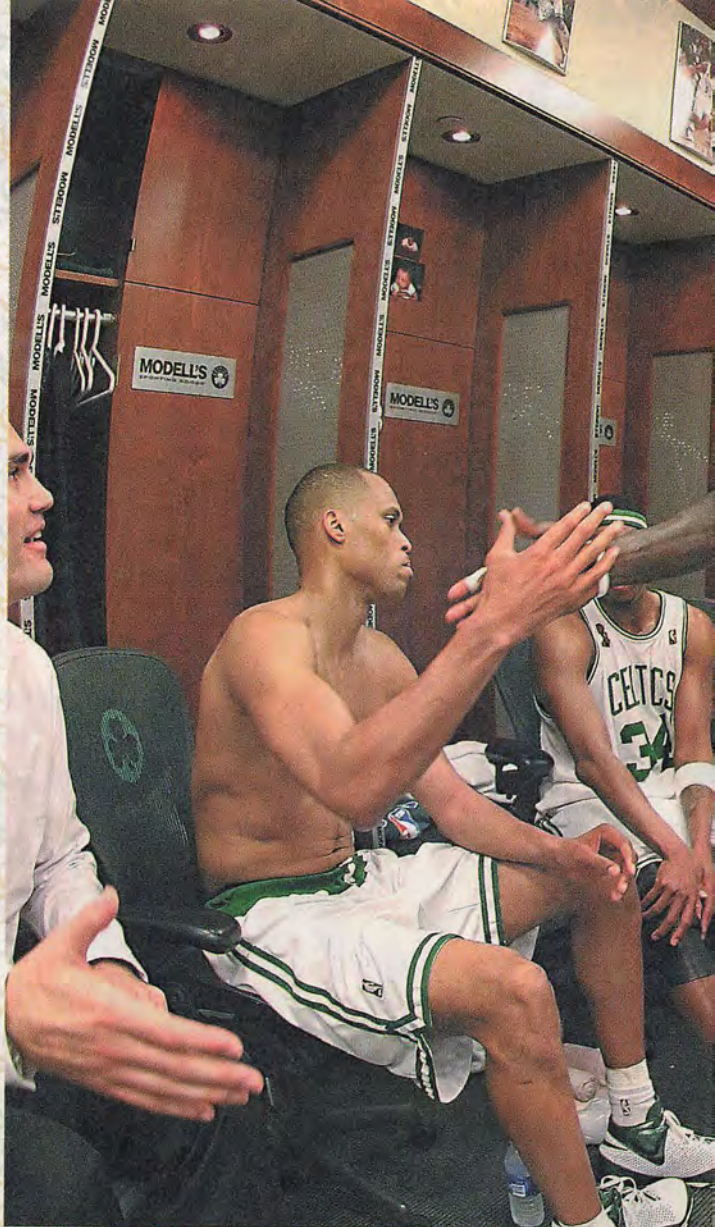
ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, yeah. When I first started playing, it was OK to fight.

SN: Are you content with the coaching role you have with the Lakers, working with individuals instead of groups?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I had hoped to get an opportunity to be a head coach, but that hasn't happened. Working with Andrew (Bynum) has been a real pleasure. I'm glad I got involved.

SN: Would you still like to coach?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Of course I'd entertain the opportunity. It may not present itself. —S.M.



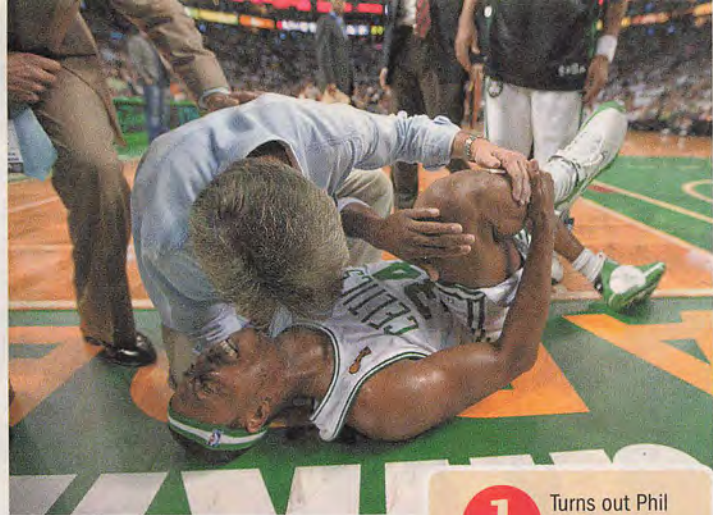
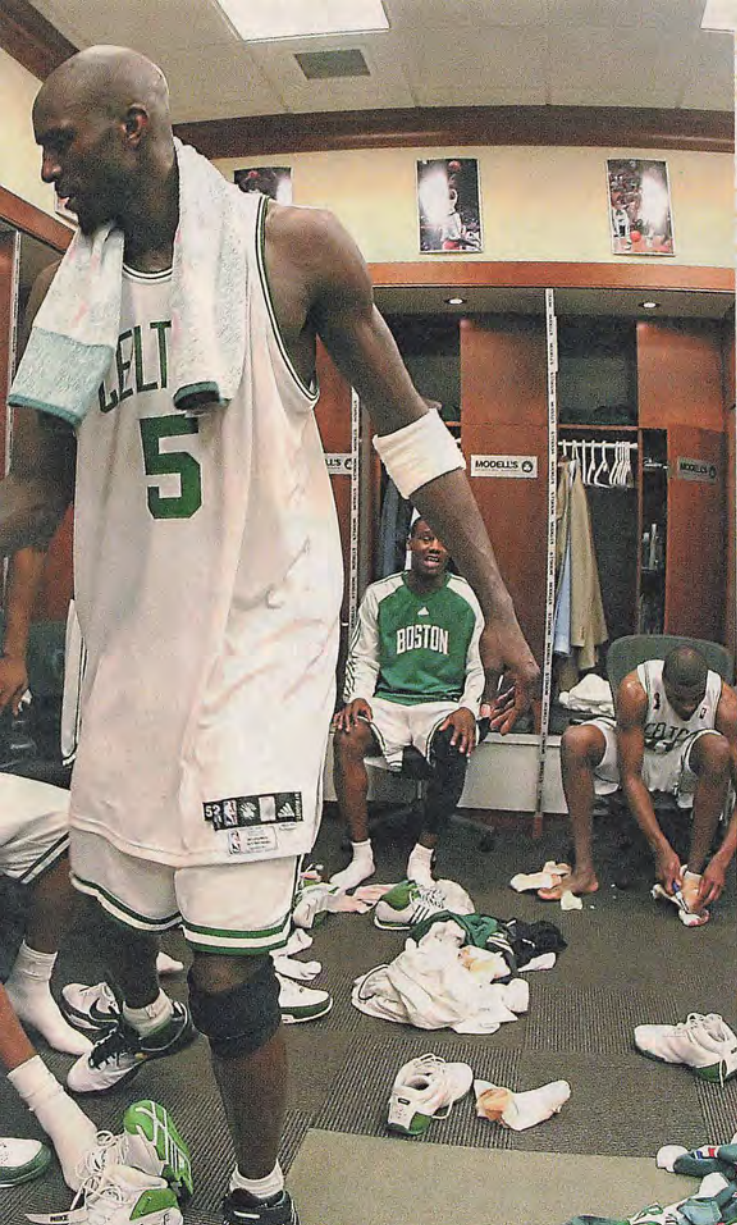
Teammates and opponents agree: Garnett is well-liked and respected, though his private life is well-protected.

since the 1995 draft, when he became the first high schooler picked in more than 20 years. When the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* wrote an in-depth feature on Garnett for its front page in 1997, shortly after Garnett signed a then-record \$125 million, six-year contract extension with the Timberwolves, he declined to be interviewed. "I like to keep my life sheltered," he told the paper.

Garnett grew up with his mother and stepfather in South Carolina, where he had to sneak out to play basketball. During his rookie season, he told *USA Today*, "My mom worked real hard, and she was always tired and cranky. My stepfather treated me like dirt. ... There was nowhere to go to get away from my environment. I'm happy I discovered basketball."

Near the end of his junior year at Mauldin High School, Garnett was involved in a hallway brawl with four others that, according to reports, may have been racially motivated and in which he may have been no more than a bystander. He was not charged with a crime, but his mom still decided to move with him to Chicago, where he played his senior year at Farragut Academy for a coach he had met in AAU basketball.

His mom followed the doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses, so Garnett



Finals 3-pointers

1 Turns out Phil Jackson was on to something when he questioned the severity of **Paul Pierce's** sprained knee. Pierce's quick recovery at least explains why he didn't bother with an MRI.

2 Looking for another reason the Celtics have the league's best defense? Try this: They know how to shut down the game's two best players. Through Game 2, Kobe Bryant was shooting only 36.8 percent against the Celtics this season, and LeBron James barely was better, having shot 37.3 percent this season.

3 I have no problem if the league switches back to a 2-2-1-1-1 format for The Finals, as long as someone can get me on one of those luxury charters. No? Well, how about a seat in first class? On a nonstop? In an exit row? An aisle seat?

was not allowed to celebrate Christmas until he left the denomination after joining the NBA. Showing a glimpse into his personal life last December, Garnett told Boston reporters, "This is my 13th (Christmas). I tend to gravitate toward (the holiday more) than others, and I really appreciate the true meaning of it."

Garnett does not allow the public inside access, but he still can light up a room with his personality. He is downright bubbly in the commercial during which he does a mini dance routine with Pierce and Ray Allen while they roam ESPN's offices seeking a nickname for the Big Three. And few superstars would consent to performing a full-blown scream in front of cameras and allowing it to be shown to thousands of fans before each game.

By all accounts, Garnett is not only respected by opponents but also well-liked, even with his in-your-face ways. The Suns' Amare Stoudemire laughs about a heated exchange he had with Garnett during a regular-season meeting. "You know with K.G., it's nothing personal. That was fun," Stoudemire says.

And nothing brings out the fun in professional athletes like winning a championship. As they clutch the trophy and douse each other with liquid refreshments, the walls they so often put up come down at least temporarily. With Garnett finally within reach of his ultimate goal, it's not too early to wonder: Might this be a time when K.G. lets his guard down? As fun as that would be, don't count on it.

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What a rush

NFL

Whether it's a red stag in New Zealand or a quarterback in New England, Vikings defensive end Jared Allen craves the thrill of the hunt and the hunt of the thrill. Put on your best camouflage and come along on his latest adventure: bear hunting in Idaho.

By Mike Nahrstedt

The Chevy Silverado is rolling along a gravel road engulfed by a lush mountain forest when Gary Stueve gently presses the brake pedal.

"There's a white-tailed deer," he says, pointing off to the right side of the truck. "See it?"

Jared Allen, riding shotgun, studies the narrow spaces between trees on the hillside. He strains his neck, then shakes his head. "No," he says.

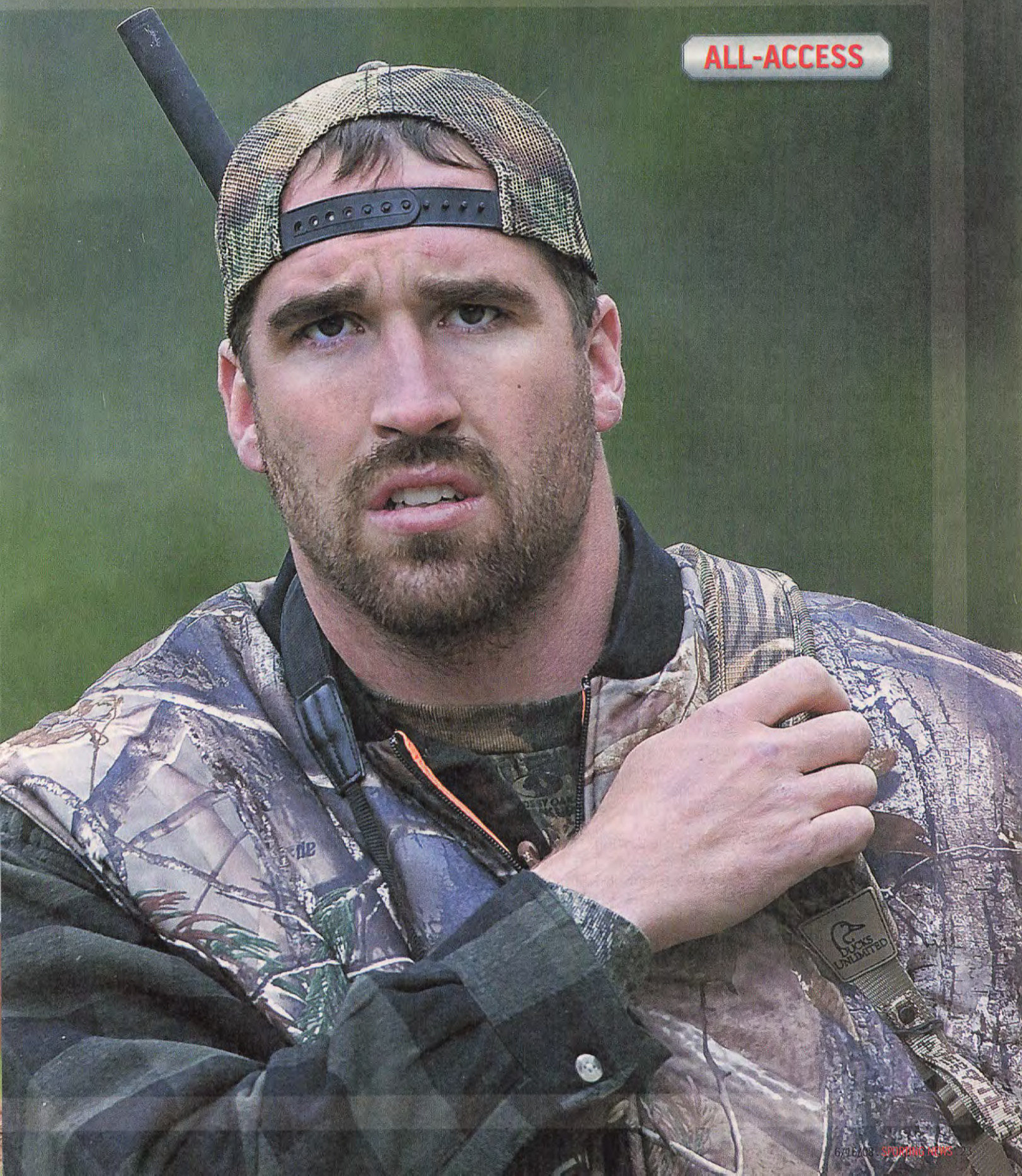
"How are you going to see a bear if you can't see a deer?" Stueve asks, backing up the truck a few feet. Instantly, the deer is in full view and Stueve laughs. He had parked in such a way that Allen couldn't possibly see the deer.

"I'm beginning to see how your madness works," Allen says, grinning.

For the past five hours on this Friday in late May, Stueve,

*Photos by
Jay Drowns / SN*

ALL-ACCESS





Stueve (left) and Scot (center) were waiting for Allen following his chase of the bear at which he failed to shoot.

the proprietor of 3 Heart Outfitters in northern Idaho, has guided Allen in and around the Selkirk Mountains in pursuit of a black bear. Allen, who led the NFL in sacks last season and then moved to the Vikings in the biggest trade of the offseason, is an accomplished hunter. He has bagged numerous deer and pheasant in the Midwest, a red stag in New Zealand, even a wild boar—with a knife, no less—in Texas. But this is his first bear hunt, and he's stoked.

And a few minutes later, he finds himself face to face with just what he came for.

Stueve is driving along a paved road when a black bear is spotted to the left, just beyond the first line of trees. Stueve slips the Silverado into reverse and eases back. Standing 30 yards away is at least 250 pounds of black bear, silently looking out on the road. Allen quietly grabs his rifle, opens his door and dashes around the truck. He kneels, balances the weapon against his right shoulder and aims. The bear is still.

"Shoot it! Shoot it!" Stueve barks.

Allen doesn't squeeze the trigger. His scope is set for long distance, several hundred yards, and his prey is barely three first downs away. The scope is a blur.

The bear turns and runs. Allen chases it into the woods, tossing

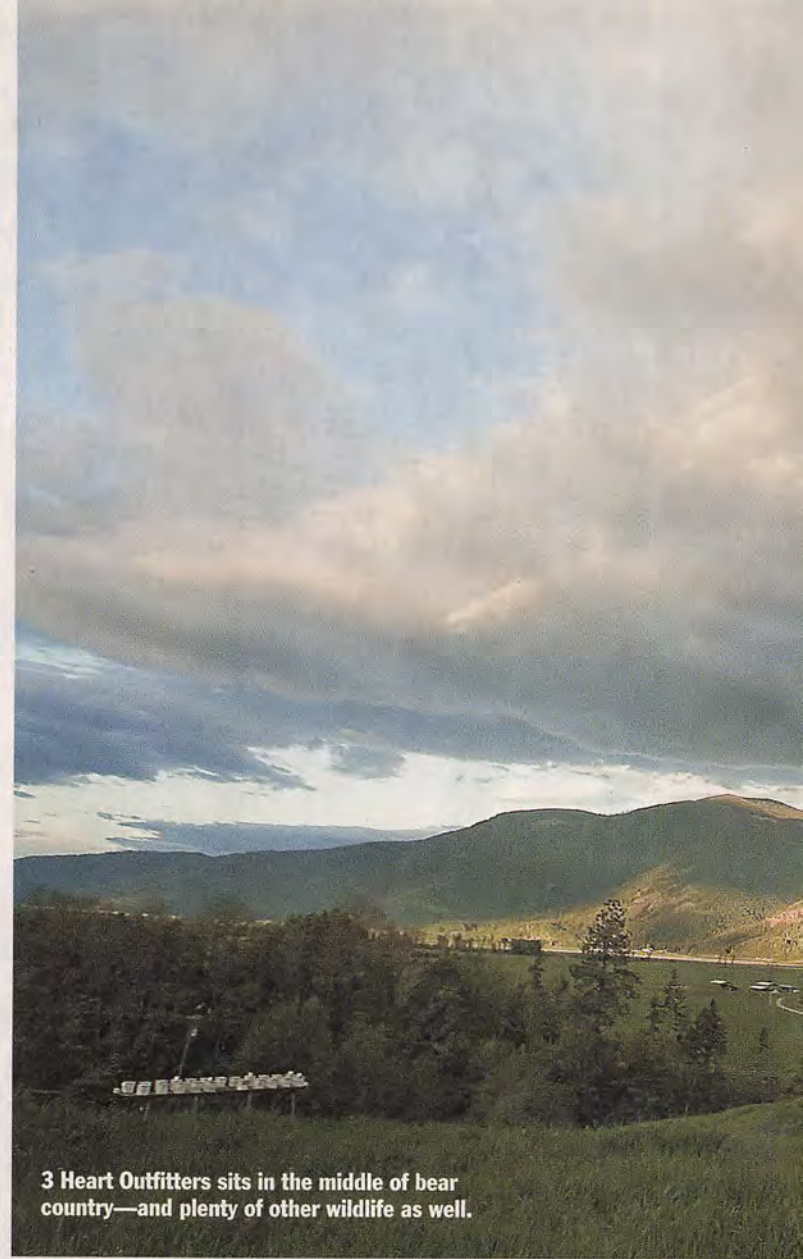
aside tree branches and mashing leaves in the soft dirt as he races uphill. He sees the bear look back at him over its shoulder, and then it's over a ridge and out of sight. Knowing he has missed his chance, Allen stops, glances to each side and walks back to the road.

"He gave you a really long chance," Stueve says.

"I know," says Allen. "I suck. But it's all right. I'll get a good, clean shot tomorrow."

It isn't exactly a bucket list, because it doesn't exist. Ask Jared Allen what adventure he wants to go on next and he has no idea. All he knows is that a bunch of them are out there, and he intends to do each one. As something pops into his head he makes a mental note, works it into his schedule, conquers it and then files it under "done." Hunting bear is just the latest one.

Last year wasn't bad. He went skydiving in Arizona. ("That was probably one of the biggest rushes I've ever had.") He went running with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain, sprinting alongside a bull that was maybe an arm's length away. ("Luckily for me, a Spaniard tripped and fell and took the bull's attention away. He got trampled pretty heav-



3 Heart Outfitters sits in the middle of bear country—and plenty of other wildlife as well.

ily, though.")

And there was that wild boar hunt. Dogs ran down the hog and pinned it to the ground and his guide flipped it over, but Allen still had to release the catch dog while avoiding tusks that were sharp enough to rip off a kneecap, or worse, and then plunge the 10-inch knife into the hog. "You go armpit to armpit with it," he says.

It sounds brutal, and it is, but then the slaying of animals was a means of survival long before any of us came along. That's how Allen looks at it. "I eat what I kill," he says, "so for

me it's kind of primitive—I've got to get something for dinner."

This year has had its share of thrills, too. He snorkeled in a shark cage at the Pro Bowl in Hawaii. He traveled to New Zealand, where he went bungee jumping and white-water rafting in addition to getting his red stag. And now the bear hunt.

Sound like a guy with a death wish? No way. A thrill wish, sure, but Allen enjoys life too much to want it to end.

"I try to live my life as if tomorrow is never promised," he says. "So

Ask Jared Allen what adventure he wants to go on next and he has no idea. All he knows is that a bunch of them are out there, and he intends to do each one.



This is ... Jared Allen

Favorite music: Country and classic rock.

Last song I downloaded: "Just Got Started Lovin' You," by James Otto, a country singer.

Best movie I've seen recently: *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. "That was pretty funny."

Last book I read: *The Ice Man: Confessions of a Mafia Contract Killer*. "It's the Richard Kuklinski story. It was awesome. They did this HBO series on him. He killed like 260-some-odd people."

Best vacation ever: New Zealand, earlier this year. "It was beautiful, it was fun, the food was amazing. Great hunting. It has everything."

Favorite way to relax: "I like going out on the lake, going hunting, lying by the pool."

On his next challenge as a hunter: "I'm going to get into bowhunting. You really have to get up close on your prey and have a lot of patience."

On working as an NFL Network sideline reporter for the Titans-Chargers wild-card game in January: "It was a blast. Of course, I don't do anything unless I can have a fun time doing it."

First thing that comes to mind when I hear 'Vikings training camp': "(Expletive). I hate training camp."

Professional goal: "I want to be known as the best defensive player ever to play the game."

Proudest moment as a football player: "The day I got drafted. Getting drafted was a lifelong goal that came true. Becoming a Minnesota Viking is right there with it, like getting drafted all over again."

Proudest moment as a person: "The constant growth I have. There hasn't been one defining moment, I don't think. The whole process of growing up, learning from my mistakes."

If I had one do-over in life, I: "Obviously, I wouldn't get those DUIs. That's a no-brainer. But without those two DUIs, I don't know if I would be the man I am today."

What I see myself doing in 15 years: "Nothing."

when it's all said and done, I'd like to look back and say I accomplished some things that I wanted to accomplish and I enjoyed my life. When I'm dead and gone, I would hope people would say, 'There was a guy who lived life. Life didn't live him.'"

Even so, Allen, 26, isn't entirely fearless. The only way he'd knowingly face a shark is in a cage. He can't stand rats or, like Indiana Jones, snakes. Political unrest makes him leery of Africa. He's terrified of his grandfather, a career Marine who once taught Jared a quick but painful lesson after the youngster called him soft. "He's the toughest SOB I ever met," he says.

But get this: His greatest fear is a concept—commitment.

"I value the sanctity of marriage," says Allen, whose parents are

divorced. "People rush in and get married, and it ends too fast. That's why my biggest fear is getting married, because it's so permanent. Your ultimate thrill in life is to have a successful marriage. Once you get into it, there's no turning back."

For Jordan Parrish, the 22-year-old woman he has been dating for almost a year, that's fair warning.

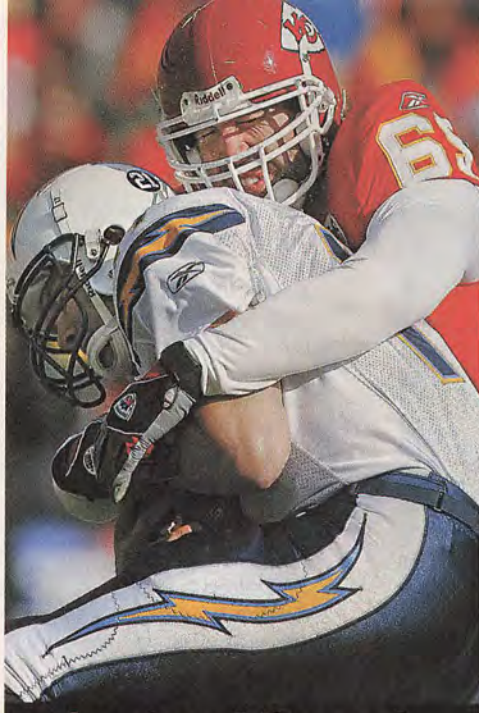
If Jared Allen thought this hunt would involve a lot of creeping through the woods until he stumbles across Papa Bear or Mama Bear, he is in for a rude awakening. Barnstorming along mountain roads in a pickup is more like it.

Bears are largely inactive in the morning, so it's about 2 p.m. when

Stueve brings the Silverado to a stop a good half-mile from the nearest mountain for the start of the hunt. Allen gets out and readies his rifles—a brand-new Remington 700 for himself, a Browning 270 WSM for Scot, his 18-year-old brother.

Scot is a redshirt freshman defensive end at Idaho State, where Jared played the same position and was an All-American and Buck Buchanan Award winner as Division I-AA's defensive player of the year in 2003, his senior season. Scot is following quite a legacy in Pocatello, and he has some catching up to do in regard to hunting as well. This isn't just Scot's first bear hunt—it's his first hunt, period.

Jared hands Scot the Browning, then straps his holster on his right hip, where he carries a .357 Magnum



Leader of the sack

Dwight Freeney and Osi Umenyiora may have more recognizable names than **Jared Allen**, who labored in the obscurity of a 4-12 Chiefs season last year, but only Jason Taylor has more sacks since the beginning of 2004, when Allen entered the NFL.

Player, team	Sacks
1. Jason Taylor, Dolphins	46
2. Jared Allen, Chiefs	43
3. Aaron Schobel, Bills	40½
Osi Umenyiora, Giants	40½
5. Shawne Merriman, Chargers*	39½
6. Aaron Kampman, Packers	38½
Patrick Kerney, Falcons/Seahawks	38½
Robert Mathis, Colts	38½
9. Derrick Burgess, Eagles/Raiders	37½
10. Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila, Packers	37
Julius Peppers, Panthers	37
12. Dwight Freeney, Colts	36

*Entered the NFL in 2005

pistol. He wears a knife in a sheath on his left hip. He pulls on his backpack and slings his rifle over his shoulder. Decked head to ankle in camouflage gear—only his cowboy boots are a solid color—Allen is ready to go, but Stueve isn't going anywhere yet.

"I thought we were going to hike in," Allen says, looking across farm fields to the mountains beyond.

"We're not hiking in until we see a bear," Stueve says. "For now, we're glassing."

With a light wind blowing, patches of blue peeking through billowing clouds above and the Kootenai River flowing north into Canada behind them, Stu-

eve and the Allens start glassing—using binoculars to scan the hillsides for bear. Thirty minutes later, they pile into the truck and drive a mile or so down the road, get out and glass some more. "You just have to glass a lot," says Stueve. "The bears are there."

So it goes, driving almost to the Canadian border, glassing for a while, driving back south, still looking for the first sign of bear. Allen, a vacuum cleaner for information, peppers Stueve with questions. *Are bears creatures of habit?* (Yes.) *Do bears travel in packs, or are they loners?* (Loners.) *What do you call the male and the female?* (Boar and sow, just like hogs.) *Can I finish off the bear with a knife?* (Yes, but it sounds like a really bad idea.)

"I'm a little excited," says Allen, his ever-present smile creasing his face. "I'm nervous. I'm not sure if Gary is kidding me about the knife, but I'm

willing to find out."

As he looks intently from his window, Allen sees plenty of wildlife—moose, elk, deer, mule deer, mountain goats, turkey, Canadian geese. But no bear. "I'm not even sure how I'm going to react when I see this bear," he says. "I hope not like a girl and scream."

It's a couple of hours later that he finds out—and blows it.

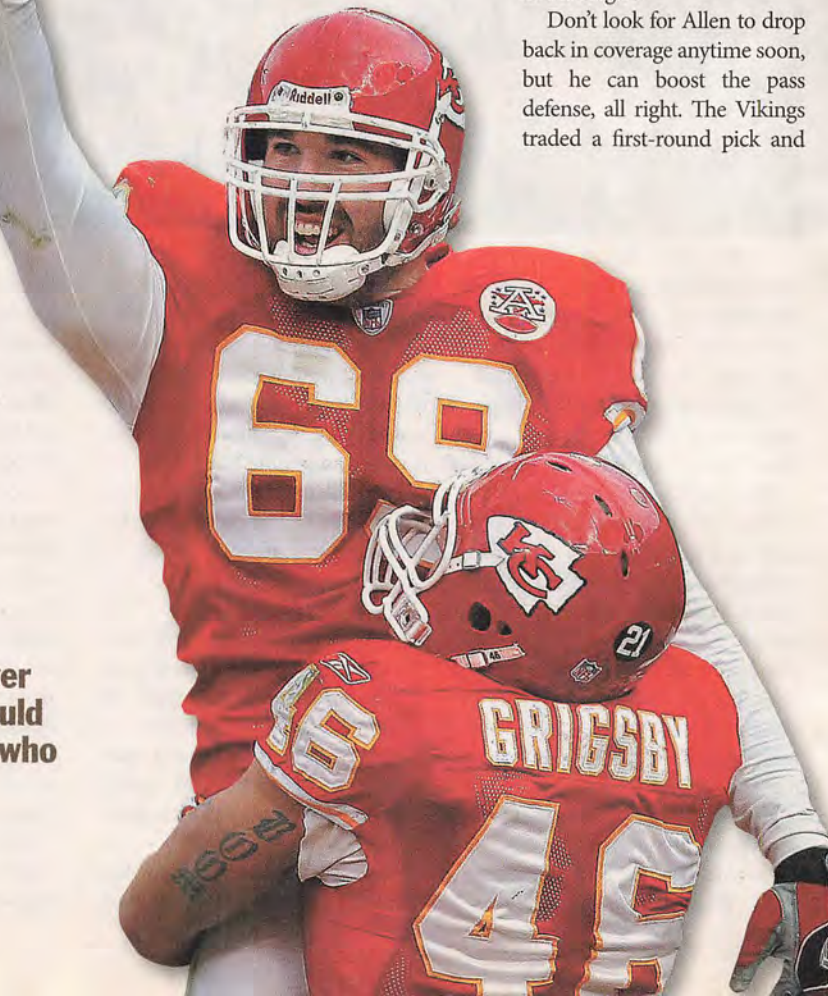
As much as Jared Allen wants to bag a bear, the Vikings need him to bag quarterbacks.

Oh, the Vikings had some success with their pass rush last year. They put up 38 sacks—and only seven teams had more. But no one player got more than five, a number Allen more than tripled in 2007. The Vikings were forced to blitz too much to get their sacks, exposing a secondary that was torched all season as Minnesota allowed the most passing yards in the league.

Don't look for Allen to drop back in coverage anytime soon, but he can boost the pass defense, all right. The Vikings traded a first-round pick and



Allen was a happy man after making the first TD catch of his career last season. He later caught a second one.



"I try to live my life as if tomorrow is never promised. When I'm dead and gone, I would hope people would say, "There was a guy who lived life. Life didn't live him." "

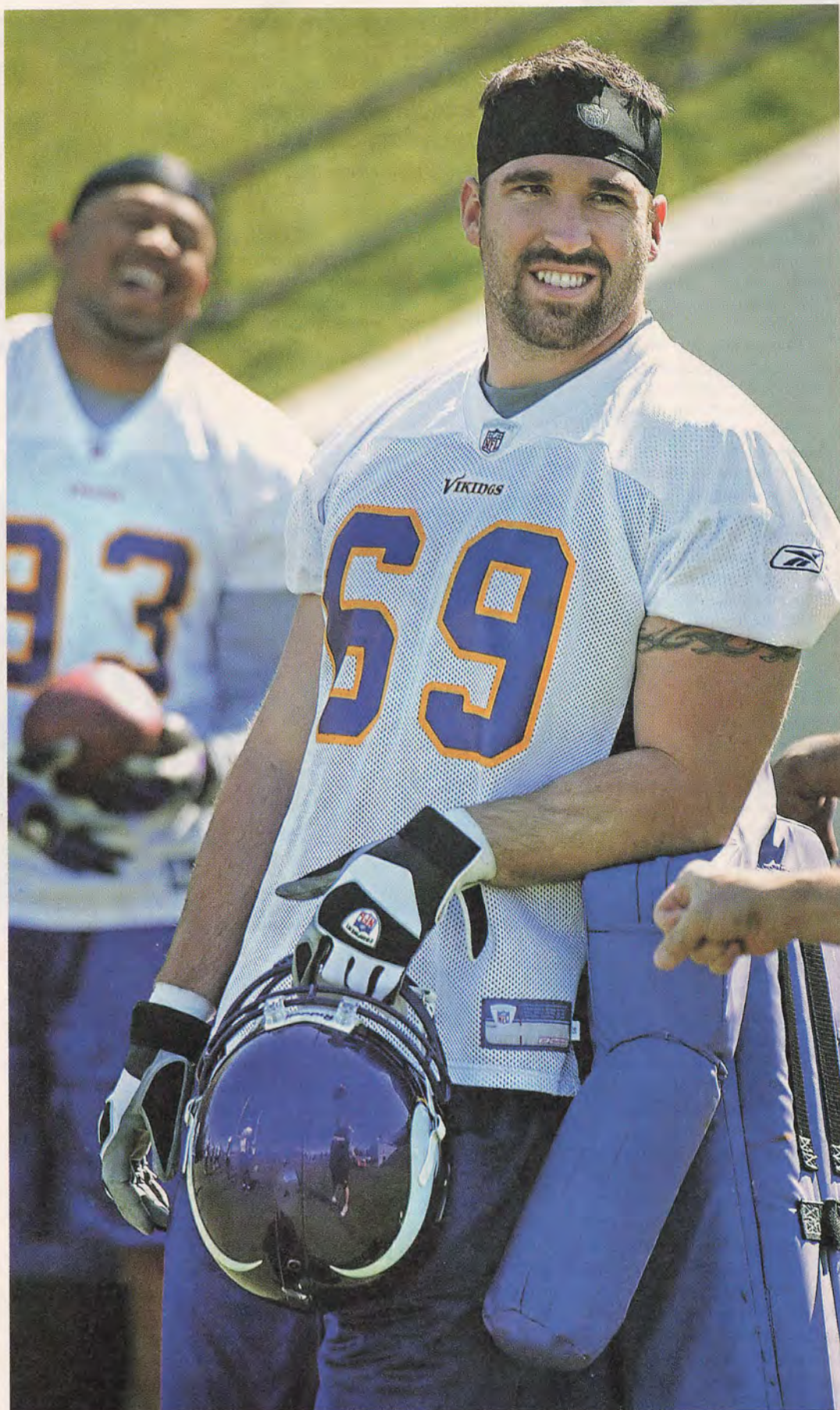
two third-rounders for Allen and made him the highest-paid defensive player in league history—six years, roughly \$74 million (\$31 million guaranteed)—because of the fury he unleashes on quarterbacks.

Allen, obtained from the Chiefs just before the draft, is one of the league's elite defensive ends, perhaps the best of all, and is in the prime of his career. He earned his first Pro Bowl berth while putting up a league-high 15½ sacks in only 14 games last season. That gave him 43 sacks in four seasons, good for sixth on the Chiefs' all-time list. He also deflected 10 passes, forced three fumbles and even caught two touchdown passes lined up as a tight end on the goal line. Not bad for a fourth-round draft pick who was originally tabbed mainly for long-snapping duty.

The Vikings were as good against the run as they were bad against the pass last year, but they won't be giving up anything with Allen on the right side. At 6-6, 270, he is not a one-dimensional end. "There are some good pass rushers in the league that you say, 'OK, he can rush the passer, but let's run at him because he's a little undersized or whatever,'" says Bengals offensive coordinator Bob Bratkowski, who saw Allen get 2½ sacks against Carson Palmer and force a fumble in a rare Kansas City win last season. "But Jared's different. He's not like that. He's good against the run and the pass."

As the Giants showed in the Super Bowl, a big pass rush can make an ordinary secondary look pretty good. Allen can have a similar effect on the Vikings. "You put (Allen) in there and your opinion of their corners changes," says CBS analyst Randy Cross. "Your opinion of the safeties changes. And if you're a quarterback going against the Vikings, and you're counting, 'A thousand one, a thousand two, a thousand three,' you're not getting much past two or three if he's rushing. If you count that real fast, how far can (a receiver) run? That's about how long your route has to be. And you'd better be ready to catch the ball because your quarterback will be having to get rid of it."

Allen's on-field contributions could well justify the Vikings' enor-



As defensive tackle Kevin Williams (93) already has discovered, Allen will keep the mood light in Minnesota.

The smoking section

For a guy who trains intensely and has become exceedingly careful about what he puts in his body, it's interesting how prominent a role tobacco plays in Jared Allen's hunting.

On the drive to the hunting lodge, Allen stops at no fewer than three gas stations before finding one that sells the chewing tobacco he wants, Red Man.

"You spend a lot of time waiting when you're hunting," he says. "Chew is great to help pass the time. It's one of those things I feel naked if I don't have it with me."

And then there's the matter of his traditional smoke before the hunt begins. It's just one cigarette, and it is pulled from the same pack he bought last year. But he won't start his hunt without it.

"It's just the one superstition I have about hunting," he says.

"I'm really not superstitious," says his guide, Gary Stueve.

"Neither am I," says Allen, smiling. "It just gives me an excuse to smoke a cigarette."

After firing off three rounds to test his scope before the bear hunt, Allen lights up a Parliament Light.

"I don't drink. I work out like a madman. I eat great," he says, taking a puff. "So for people to see me smoking a cigarette, in my mind, it's hilarious."

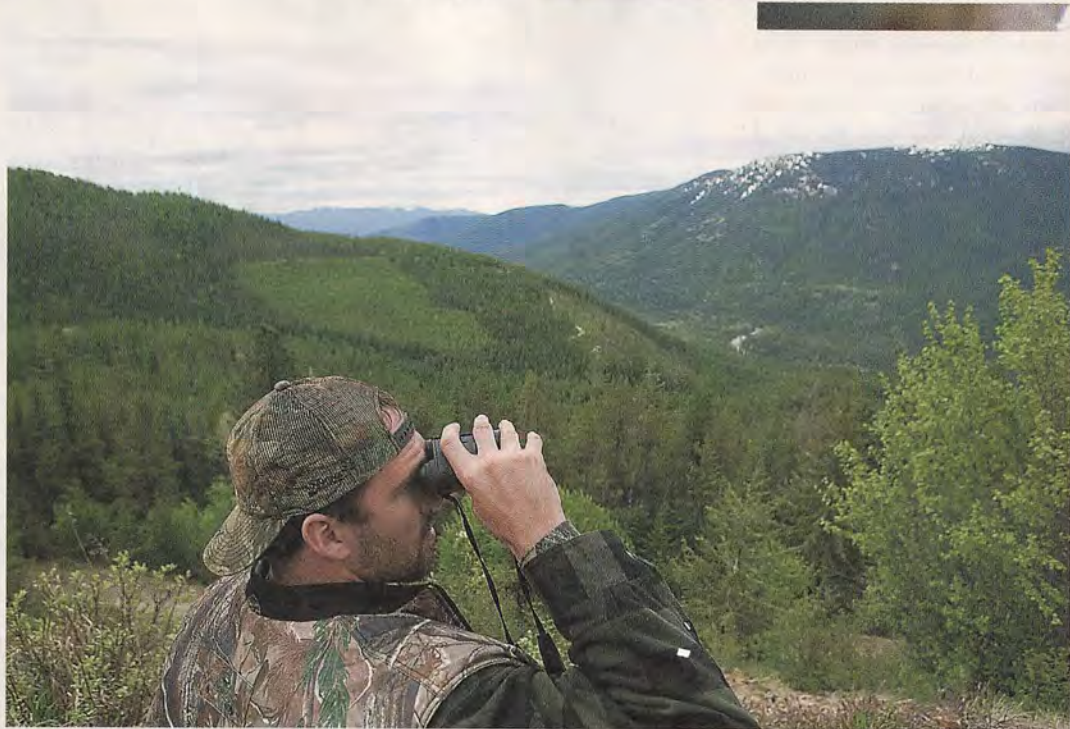
mous investment in him, but there is a potential catch. "Off the field, you're taking a gigantic financial risk," Cross says. "If he screws up again, he could get a year's suspension."

Allen played in 14 games last year because he was suspended for the first two, a number that was halved from the league's original sentence. The suspension was the result of a pair of 2006 DUIs in the Kansas City area. Allen readily admits that he did his share of partying and got into his share of fights over the years—he also had a DUI as a college student—and that he made a couple of huge mistakes when he got behind the wheel those nights in '06. He took

'Off the field, you're taking a gigantic financial risk. If he screws up again, he could get a year's suspension, that's all.'

—CBS analyst Randy Cross

Allen could only wonder how many bears were wandering through these mountains—or where the grizzly that left this track might be.



his lumps with the Kansas legal system (two days in jail, two days in a drug treatment program and a day of house arrest), the NFL, the court of public opinion and with the Chiefs, who cooled to the idea of giving him a long-term contract extension. Then he did something to make sure it never happens again.

He quit drinking, cold turkey. Since the last DUI arrest, on September 26, 2006, Allen says he hasn't had a sip of alcohol.

"Everybody likes to believe that you get a DUI, you have alcohol issues," he says. "For me, it was a growing-up issue. Yeah, I quit drinking because I realized, OK, the com-

mon denominator in this thing was the booze, so let's get rid of it. Obviously, I wasn't responsible at that time in my life to handle it. I needed to learn how to manage my life."

Allen already had sworn off alcohol when he got a call from his grandfather. It was not a pleasant conversation. "I had to point out to him that when these things happen, he puts a blemish on the family name," says Ray Allen, a Marine captain known as Scarface who retired after 23 years to a 15-acre gentleman's ranch in northern California. "I said, 'Now what are you going to do about it? How are you going to fix this?'"

For Allen, there was nothing

worse than disappointing the man he respects more than anyone on the planet—even more than his father, Ron, with whom he lived after his parents divorced. (Scot split time with his mother and father in San Jose before moving to San Diego with his father.) "It drove deep. I felt like I had let my family down."

Allen doesn't go out as much as he used to. He is more committed than ever to his offseason workouts; he hired a personal trainer a year ago and includes jujitsu and kickboxing as parts of a rigorous regimen to improve his endurance, core strength, hip flexibility and hand-eye coordination. He is fanatical about his high-protein diet. He



Allen likes to think he could outwrestle a bear. Asked what he thought, Stueve said that, given Allen's size and quickness, he might stand a chance against a cub. Maybe. That was all Allen needed to hear. 'Given the right size of the bear,' Allen told his disbelieving agent, Ken Harris, on the phone, 'I could take it. That's a professional opinion.'

immerses himself in film year-round. And when it comes to the nightlife, he generally opts for dinner and a movie with his girlfriend over clubbing with the boys. When he does go out with his buddies, he's still the life of the party—minus the alcohol.

"You couldn't even tell he doesn't drink anymore," says Jeff White, a pheasant-hunting pal from Scottsdale, Ariz., where Allen lives and trains in the offseason. "He's just laughing and carrying on and ribbing with each other. He's the same guy as he was when he drank. I just think he realized that you don't need alcohol to go out and have a good time."

When it comes down to it, Allen is a simple guy, a goofball who just likes having fun. That was him in the Chiefs' locker room one Halloween, wearing only a Speedo and goggles for his Michael Phelps "costume." The Vikings can only wonder what he might do.

Gary Stueve has lived in northern Idaho for almost every one of his 50 years, and he can't remember a spring starting this late. Many of the high roads he typically takes to help hunters locate their prey—often via horseback or mountain bike—remain covered with

snow. "We're not even hunting the places I usually hunt, this season is so screwed up," he says.

And so he is forced to navigate the lower levels of the mountains in his pickup with Jared and Scot on the second and final day of the hunt. 3 Heart Outfitters sits in a valley between the Selkirk and Purcell mountains, and on this day he heads east to the Purcells, starting around 8:45 to give Jared more time to get the bear he covets.

Even so, a morning bear sighting isn't likely, which means there is more driving than glassing for the first few hours. There are a number of false alarms; it's amazing how much a tree stump, rock overhang

or branch can look like a bear when that's all you can think about.

By 2 p.m., a light rain has started, but Allen decides to sit in it and look through his binoculars for a while, taking in a spectacular view filled with the greenery on which bears feed. "It's so peaceful," he says.

Bear droppings are scattered along the road, some fairly fresh, and a few trees have recently been stripped of their bark near their base, a telltale sign that bears are feeding on the sweet sap inside. "There's a bear hanging around in here," Stueve says. The hunters study their surroundings, to no avail.

About an hour later, Stueve is steering the Silverado up a steep



The hunt included much more glassing than stalking, but Allen was sure he'd get his bear when he, Stueve and Scot were scaling a hillside in pursuit.

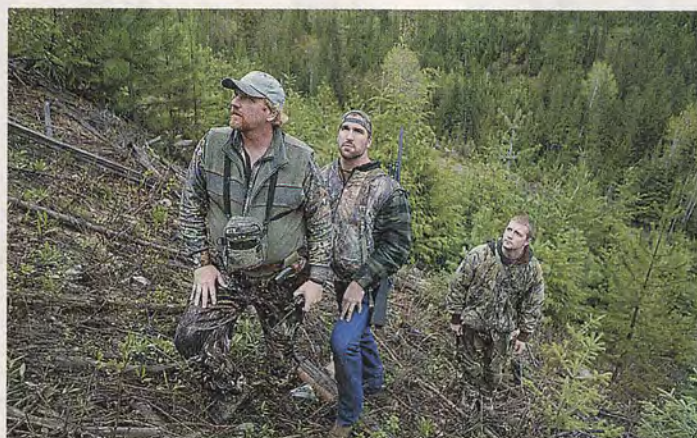
mud road when he comes to a stop. "We're going to get out and walk," he says. "This is looking too good."

The brothers and Stueve wind up the path, finding moose, elk and deer footprints all over, plus the occasional mound of reminder that a bear was there earlier. Near the end of the trail they find a deep track in the soft mud, wide enough for Scot to lay his entire hand in.

"That's a grizzly track," Stueve says. "That's a 9-and-a-half, 10-foot bear. I'm going home. That's a big bear."

Stueve isn't kidding. He is blown away by the size of the track and is clearly ready to hike down to the truck. The Allens are right behind him, and 40 minutes later they're back in the truck. "Now that we're in the car," Allen says, "I want to go back to see that 10-foot griz."

Jared Allen spent much of his childhood living on a ranch in California, first at his grandfather's place, then on a San Jose ranch where his father trained horses. His father and grandfather taught him and his older brother, Brian, how to shoot and brought



them along on hunting trips. They also went fishing a lot. "I've always been an outdoors kind of guy," he says.

When Jared was 8, he told his father he wanted to be a professional football player. "OK, this is what you have to do, bud," Ron Allen recalls telling his son. "You have to eat, drink and sleep football right now until draft day."

Ron was his boys' Pop Warner coach, and he knows a thing or two about football—he got a couple of tryouts with the Vikings before flirting with the USFL for a while. A broken hand and his rising years eventually convinced him that he should stop chasing the dream, so he moved the family to California, picking up where he had left off from his days roping calves and riding bulls and bareback broncs in rodeos. Jared did many of the same things growing up.

"I had this paint stallion named Rockin' Robin that Jared just loved to death," Ron Allen says. "He liked to ride Rockin'. So Jared would come home to the ranch from college and he'd get on Rockin' and he'd chase my Texas longhorns out in the field. He'd jump off the horse and jump on the cows and the bulls and grab their horns and try to wrestle them to the ground."

Wrestling longhorns, too? Considering everything else, why the heck not? This is a guy who lives for the jolt of adrenaline that comes from individual conquest, be it hunting bear in Idaho or quarterbacks in Indianapolis. Either way, it's a one-on-one battle in which a victor emerges.

"When I line up across from a blocker, he knows the fight is going to be brutal," Allen says. "And when we're done I want to be able to shake hands and hear him say, 'Man, that

When it was all said and done, Allen never pulled the trigger.

was a long day at the office.' I want to take a piece of his soul."

Football is Allen's passion, the only thing he ever saw himself doing for a living. But he looks forward to a time when he can get back to his roots. After he retires, you'll more likely bump into him at a rodeo or hunting lodge or trout stream than at a football stadium. He'll wage battles in the outdoors arena for years to come.

And in that regard, Allen will be making up for lost time. Truth is, he hasn't been a hunter all that long. He was a tagalong on most of those hunting trips as a youngster, shooting for practice more than at game, and he never hunted as a teenager or at Idaho State. It wasn't until his second year with the Chiefs that he got into the sport, and he sat in tree stands and hiked fields for a full year before getting his first kill, a deer in Missouri. Many more have followed.

But still no bear.



A creek gorged with runoff from the winter snows cascades downhill. A soft breeze whispers in the trees. Dark clouds still blanket the sun from view, but the rain has stopped. And somewhere, maybe 200 yards away, maybe less, a black bear is padding through the woods.

Finally, some real hunting.

The Allen boys are on the side of a mountain, looking up a thickly forested wall for signs of movement. Stueve, who was summoned to the mountain after his son, Cory, spotted the bear, peers through his binoculars. No one sees the bear, but they know it's there.

The hillside is steep and slick, the fresh rainfall having moistened the leaves and branches that carpet the ground. Stueve and his clients step carefully as they climb, alternating soft squishes of leaves with crisp snaps of twigs that are impossible to avoid. Higher and higher they go,

zigzagging their way up, until Stueve says, "I see it."

Stueve points through the woods to his left and motions Jared to advance, Scot to stay put. Jared walks crouched for 50 feet, then lies on his stomach and looks through his scope, Stueve alongside him. A minute passes, then another, but no shot. The bear has escaped from view.

A few more well-placed steps, then a quick scamper up the hill after hearing the bear's "humph!" and the three are in a flat clearing, 1,500 feet above their starting point. Sensing the bear has turned around, Stueve sends Scot 100 yards laterally and tells him to start inching his way back down the hill while he and Jared do the same from their spot. They proceed gingerly, sometimes unable to see more than 30 feet in any direction, never knowing if the bear might be waiting beyond the next grouping of trees.

Nothing. They arrive back at the

No, Allen's contract doesn't have an anti-bear hunting clause

The Vikings are well-aware of Jared Allen's extracurricular activities, but they didn't have anything specific written into his megacontract to protect their interests. They didn't have to.

Rick Spielman, the Vikings' vice president of player personnel, says the team did a thorough background check on Allen and discussed his thrill-driven pursuits with him. The Vikings are counting on Allen to play it smart because if he can't play because of any nonfootball injury, they don't have to pay him. That language is part of any standard NFL contract.

"But I also know he's not jumping off cliffs or trying to hang glide without a hang glider," Spielman says.

truck, never having fired a shot and nighttime ready to fall. The hunt is over.

"I already had it as a kill," says Allen, disappointed that his one deep venture into the forest came up empty. But he got to enjoy the thrill of the hunt, something he says he didn't really experience the day before when he saw the bear near the edge of the woods.

"I'd have taken it," he says, pack-

ing his bags to return to Minnesota for a day on the lake with his new 44-foot yacht and then for more Vikings OTAs. "I'd have gotten the bearskin rug, and I'd have been proud of it. But that's not really the way I wanted to get it."

If Allen wants to scratch a successful bear hunt off his thrill-seeker to-do list, he'll have to wait. Which is fine with him. There's always next spring.

SN

Winning has done wonders for Willie Randolph, Ron Washington, Ned Yost and John Gibbons.

From hot seats to surprising feats

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

That Willie Randolph was sitting in the manager's office in the visiting clubhouse at San Diego's Petco Park last weekend could be taken as a minor miracle. Consider his past two years. In the 2006 playoffs, Randolph's Mets were heavy favorites in the National League Championship Series but lost to the Cardinals. Last year, they blew a seven-game division lead in September and missed the post-season altogether. Then, after trading for ace starting pitcher Johan Santana, pushing the Mets' payroll to an N.L.-high of nearly \$140 million, Randolph directed his team to a sub-.500 record through 48 games this year.

It was at that point that Randolph openly acknowledged his tenuous job security. Speaking about general manager Omar Minaya, Randolph joked, "I thought I saw him in the back sharpening his machete. So I don't know if that makes me feel too good." When the Mets returned to New York from a road trip in late May, Randolph was called into a two-hour meeting with Minaya and ownership to explain the Mets' poor play. Many expected Randolph to be fired.

He wasn't. In fact, after losing on the day of the meeting, the Mets won seven of their next nine. On the brink of being fired, Randolph has been granted a reprieve. "I feel good about it," Randolph says. "I feel good about the fact that we're coming together. We're on our way. We're starting to get our swagger back."

Funny thing about managers on the brink—a flash of winning, a little swagger and, suddenly, that brink gets a whole lot farther away. It's a phenomenon not limited to Randolph and the New York media meat grinder (though a hyperactive rumor mill always helps fuel managerial speculation). We've seen it repeatedly in this parity-packed season: Hot seats can cool quickly.

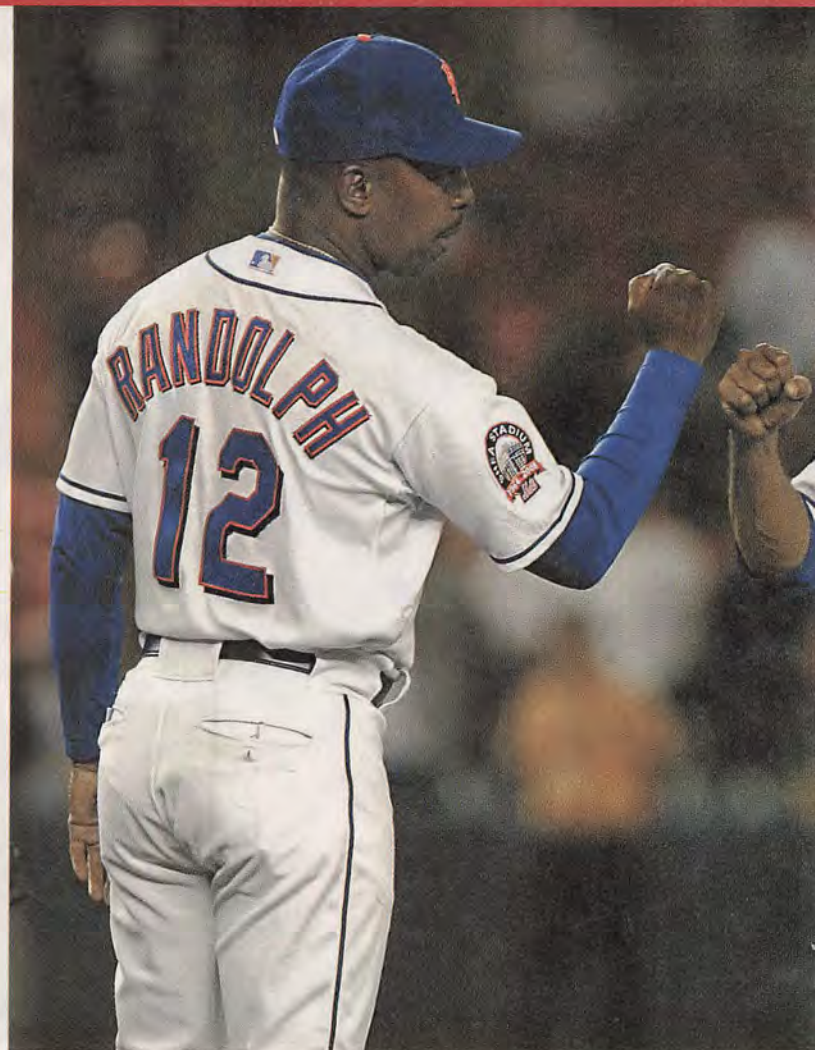
■ When the Rangers left for a seven-game

West Coast swing on May 1, few expected Ron Washington to be the team's manager by trip's end. The Rangers had the worst April in franchise history (10-18) and were making embarrassing mental mistakes—at one point, first baseman Ben Broussard allowed a runner to score from second base on an infield hit. New team president Nolan Ryan met with owner Tom Hicks and general manager Jon Daniels, and Washington didn't get a strong, public vote of confidence. But the Rangers got two straight wins before the trip, and their pitching came together on the road. They won nine of 11, and the Washington guillotine has been put back into storage. For now.

■ After the Brewers fell to last place in the N.L.

Central on May 18, a posting appeared on a Wisconsin political blog declaring that "Ned Yost will be relieved of his duties during the team's off-day Monday and replaced on an interim basis by team bench coach Ted Simmons." Fans in Milwaukee, many of whom had been calling for Yost's removal since last season, rejoiced. Prematurely. Yost was not fired. Instead, the Brewers overhauled the roster—they added pitchers Mark DiFelice, Julian Tavarez and Tim Lillard and put Russell Branyan into a platoon with Bill Hall at third base. Milwaukee won 12 of its next 16 games, and Yost is still around.

■ Toronto manager John Gibbons took advantage of a late April day off to visit his 96-year-old



After encountering more than a few bumps in the road, Randolph has been able to enjoy some fist bumps with Fernando Tatis and other Mets players.

grandmother in a Boston suburb. On seeing him, she immediately asked what was wrong with his team and whether he'd be fired. "I didn't expect her to hammer me," Gibbons says. "I thought she'd give me a hug or something." But when the Blue Jays lost their next two games and dropped to 11-17, it seemed Gibbons—whose contract is up this year—was on dodgy footing. The Blue Jays' offense was dormant, and the buyout of designated hitter Frank Thomas, who bristled because Gibbons had benched him, seemed an odd fix. In May, though, the already-strong pitching staff (3.75 ERA in April) responded to the club's hitting woes with an even better month (an excellent 2.91 ERA), and the Blue Jays went 20-10. The next time Gibbons sees Grandma, maybe he'll get that hug. At least he can be thankful she doesn't have a machete.

SN



The Angels, Cubs, Rays, Red Sox and Phillies all are at the top of our Power Poll. But who's No. 1? Find out at sportingnews.com.



speedreads

Kudos to NESN, the broadcast network owned in part by the Red Sox, for showing the dugout scrap between Kevin Youkilis and Manny Ramirez last week. Some questioned why the team's own broadcast vehicle would show such a sensitive moment, but too often team broadcasts veer so far out of the way of controversy that they lose credibility.

So much for Cleveland's wealth of pitching. Losing Jake Westbrook for the season to elbow surgery is a big blow for a team that hoped to add some offense by trading pitching. The Indians already had lost top pitching prospect Adam Miller for two months because of a finger injury.

Say what you will about the behavior of White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen. But he has had two notable outbursts this season, one on May 5 and one on June 1. After the first one, the White Sox went on a 12-5 run. After the second, they started a winning streak that was at five games entering the week.

It would be easy to criticize the Blue Jays for letting RHP **Josh Banks** leave on waivers in late April, but he had been a mediocre minor league starter and began the season with a 7.02 ERA in three Class AAA starts. The Padres picked up Banks for \$20,000, and it appeared they'd get nothing for their investment when Banks, 25, put together a 6.66 ERA in eight appearances for San Diego's Class AAA team. Still, the Padres were pressed into adding Banks to their rotation because of injuries to RHPs **Chris Young** and **Jake Peavy**. Before arriving in San Diego, Banks altered his delivery, making his arm action smoother and more consistent. Always a control pitcher, he now is getting better movement. Banks allowed one earned run and just 19 hits in his first 23 innings and has been a boost to the Padres' battered rotation. ➤ In his bleep-heavy tirade last week, Mariners manager **John McLaren** clearly placed blame for the team's struggles on the players. Still, McLaren may wind up taking the fall. Former big league managers **Sam Perlozzo** and **Jim Riggleman** are already on Seattle's staff, and **Buck Showalter's** name has been mentioned, too. ➤ With RHP **Francisco Rodriguez** intent on testing the free-agent market (early odds have him replacing free-agent LHP **Billy Wagner** with the Mets), the Angels may have already found their closer of the future—rookie RHP **Jose Arredondo**, who was moved to the bullpen last year in the minors. Arredondo

INSIDE DISH

throws a mid-90s fastball and a nasty splitter and is built like Rodriguez (both are 6-0, 175). The Angels might be inclined to give veteran eighth-inning reliever RHP **Scot Shields** first crack at the closing job, but Arredondo (0.77 ERA in 10

appearances) could wind up with the job eventually. ➤ Mets RHP **Pedro Martinez** is hoping his presence can help keep the team's clubhouse together. Martinez says he felt helpless when he was absent as he rehabbed from shoulder surgery during the Mets' free-fall last September. "That forced me to actually just keep my mouth shut," he says. "I couldn't say anything. I wasn't here to see all the struggles." ➤ With 3B **Josh Fields** heating up in Class AAA—he hit .324 in a recent 10-game stretch and has eight home runs overall—the White Sox will have to revisit their third base situation and decide whether to trade 3B **Joe Crede** or Fields, who hit 23 homers for the Sox last year while Crede was injured. Crede's power numbers dropped in May (two homers and seven RBIs) after a solid April (seven and 22). Chicago is reluctant to make major moves while in first place, and trading Fields is unlikely anyway because Crede will be a free agent after this season.

San Diego's rotation needed a shot in the arm—and got it from the unheralded Banks, who is thriving with a new delivery.



Lance Berkman stands at first base on a cool May night at Busch Stadium. His conversation with Albert Pujols is animated, and a Berkman observation prompts a laugh from Pujols and a playful whack on the back with his glove.

"We talk about hitting. We talk about everything," Pujols says. "He is a great hitter and an even greater person. I enjoy him. Besides, we have something in common." Pujols, who is every bit as intense at 3:48 in the afternoon as he is when he steps to the plate several hours later, grins and says: "We slept in the same bed."

Don't call Deadspin. Turns out that Berkman and Pujols both played for the Hays (Kan.) Larks in the Jayhawk League, a summer wood-bat league for elite college players. Players live with families who open their homes, and Berkman and Pujols stayed with Frank and Barb Leo. So, indeed, they slept in the same bed. "Four years apart, though," says Frank. "I can't tell you what great individuals they both are."

Berkman, the Astros' first baseman and baseball's resident breath of fresh air, just had one of the most amazing months in baseball history. He hit an astonishing .471 in May, with a .553 on-base percentage. Yet, he likely isn't on your list of the top five hitters in the game.

"I am pleased with my start, but I also know we have four months to go," says Berkman, a switch hitter who entered the week with a .374 average, 18 homers and 51 RBIs. He is well aware of the enormity of his numbers, but his manner is so nonchalant it is disarming. He loves to joke around and turns his sharp sense of humor on himself. "That's just me" is his simple explanation.

Much of what makes Berkman excel revolves around simple. His routine, his work habits, his swing are all described that way.

'Every time I step into the box, the game slows down.'

—Lance Berkman, on how well he's seeing the ball this season

"He is a born hitter," says one veteran National League scout. "Maybe he doesn't look the part. Look at the numbers. That's all that matters."

Berkman is the heart of an Astros lineup whose slugging has the team on the edge of the chase for the N.L. Central title. No one expected Houston to make the Cubs look over their shoulders, and that includes Berkman. "Maybe I underestimated," he told

reporters in the midst of a 24-11 streak that had pushed the team to seven games above .500 in late May.

It's hard to imagine that the Astros' shaky pitching staff will allow the club to stay close, but don't be surprised at anything Berkman accomplishes.

"I see the ball incredibly well right now," he says. He doesn't describe it as big, like a beach ball, the way some players do. He says it's "identifying the pitch as soon as it leaves the pitcher's hand, and that's the key. You're not fooled by off-speed stuff, and you don't have to cheat to get to the fastball because you're right on it, too."

"Every time I step into the box, the game slows down."

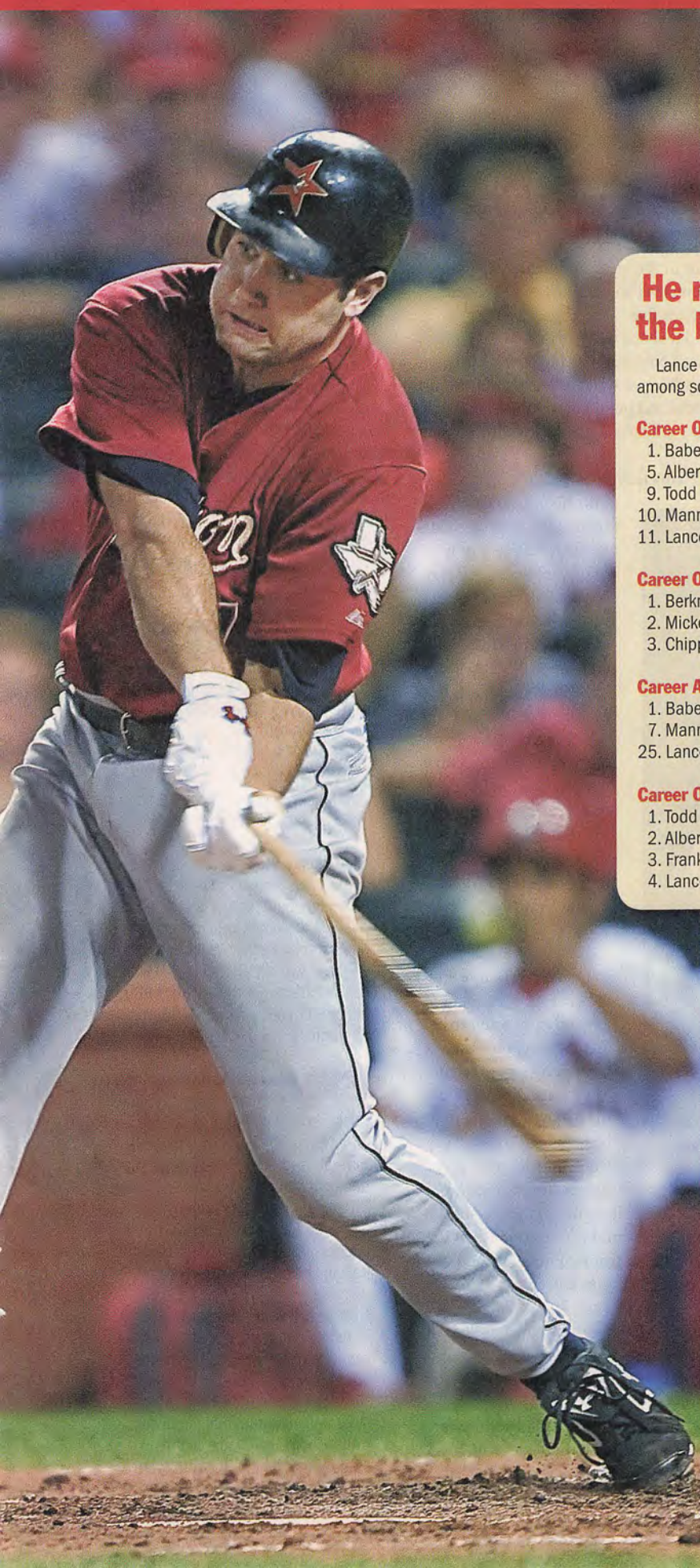
Berkman is enjoying this incredible present in part because he lived a past that did not foretell this level of success. He had a nice high school career—"I was never a dominant player"—that yielded only one scholarship offer, to Rice. He was, however, the National Baseball Congress World Series MVP in 1995 for the Larks, and he led NCAA Division I hitters in home runs two years later. Not

Nice and Easy

Astros slugger Lance Berkman is putting up eye-popping numbers with a simple, lighthearted approach

By John Rawlings

Berkman is no workout warrior, but you wouldn't know it from looking at his numbers.



He rates with the big boys

Lance Berkman's rank among some of the greats:

Career OPS

1. Babe Ruth	1.164
5. Albert Pujols	1.044
9. Todd Helton	1.007
10. Manny Ramirez	1.001
11. Lance Berkman	.982

Career OPS, switch hitter

1. Berkman	.982
2. Mickey Mantle	.977
3. Chipper Jones	.957

Career ABs/RBI

1. Babe Ruth	3.80
7. Manny Ramirez	4.41
25. Lance Berkman	4.96

Career OBP, active players

1. Todd Helton	.430
2. Albert Pujols	.423
3. Frank Thomas	.420
4. Lance Berkman	.415

everyone was convinced, though. For example, the Mets, drafting No. 6 in 1997, thought a lefthanded high school pitcher named Geoff Goetz had a better future. The White Sox took college short-stop Jason Dellaero at No. 15. Houston picked 16th and selected Berkman.

"Our scouts thought he would be good," says Gerry Hunsicker, who was Houston's general manager at the time. "But this good? I'm not sure."

Goetz never reached the majors, and Dellaero appeared in a mere 11 games. Berkman had become a regular for Houston by May 2000, and in the next seven years put together such home run-and-RBI seasons as 34 and 126, 42 and 128, and 45 and 136. But after finishing third in the MVP voting in 2006, Berkman hit a career-low .278 last season and struck out a career-high 125 times.

"Nothing is different this year, except I'm getting a few more hits," Berkman says. "Same guy going out there for nine years. I get ready the same way every year. I feel good, but nothing different than usual."

Last year's subpar season did not show on him, nor does this year's success. "He loves to play the game, but baseball is not the most important thing in Lance Berkman's life," says Frank Leo, alluding to family and faith. The Leo family and Berkman remain close, and they had dinner in St. Louis in May.

A longtime baseball talent evaluator with insight into Berkman's makeup agrees: "When the game is over, he's out of there and doesn't think twice about it. He plays for fun. He just wants to go out and be him-

self. Nobody is going to accuse him of working too hard."

Would Berkman, 32, be a better player if he pumped iron and devoured video, the way some of his peers do? "I don't think he would be," the evaluator says. "Some guys get paralysis by analysis. That won't happen to Lance."

Clearly, Berkman's regimen works for him now. "He needs to think about his body five years from now," says an insider familiar with the Astros. "He doesn't have to do the work now, but if he wants to hit like this when he's 36, he has to change his habits."

Berkman acknowledges his physique "is not as chiseled as some other players. I think I need a little padding so I don't pull an oblique." He adds, "I do watch video some. If I disagree with a ball-strike call, I come in to look at the pitch and confirm that I'm right and (the umpire) is wrong."

One scout says we should resist falling for the "dumb as a box of rocks" image Berkman seems to want to construct. "I've seen him more than I've seen my own kids over the last five years, and he is phenomenal," the scout says. "He and Pujols are the best. His approach is simple, but don't think he is not smart. That would be a mistake."

"I hit by feel," Berkman says. "I knew what I was doing wrong last year, and I know what I'm doing right this year. This is not rocket science."

Whatever it is, Berkman seems to have it mastered.

SN

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

One of the biggest big league thrills is watching your buddies do well

Probably the coolest part of my job is getting to know all the different guys in the major leagues. It's very cool when guys are making history, especially when they're my buddies Ken Griffey and Manny Ramirez.

Man Ram or Manny Being Manny or Baby Bull reached the 500-homer milestone recently, and Griffey was at 599 entering the week. I had the honor of playing with Griffey for the Reds when he hit No. 500 on Father's Day in 2004. The most fun we

him—except us in the bullpen. So the next inning, he came running over to us, and we all gave him a big hug and a high-five.

A couple of days later, we were in New York playing the Mets, and Nike had 500 balloons waiting in the clubhouse when we walked in. We popped as many as we could and put them in Junior's locker. I kept one—and I still have it. It's the little things that matter.

Being Man Ram's teammate in 2003, I got a look

into his life, and what a treat. He's truly a wonderful, carefree guy who only wants to hit and play baseball. There's not a whole heck of a lot on his radar except his family and baseball. He's a big kid. Heck, we all are, but Manny takes the cake.

I think he can't figure out why people go crazy when he's around. He just wants to hang out, and the next thing you know, there's 250 people around him chanting "Manny! Manny!" when all he wants is to go to the restroom.

Don't let him fool you, either. He's smart and is as good as he wants to be. The knock on him is what people put on him. They want him to throw his helmet when he does bad, but he won't. They want him to treat every day in the big leagues in

Boston like he's the luckiest guy on the face of the earth. He won't. They want him to panic when the Red Sox are one game from elimination and say something colorful, like guaranteeing a win. He won't.

He just hits, and if he doesn't hit, then, well, he'll hit tomorrow. He's refreshing. He's having fun, and it shows. He's good, but baseball is not all he's about and that bugs folks.

You know what else is cool? Griffey and Manny have made it through the steroids era without a trace of controversy. What's not cool: that I even have to mention that.



When you have teammates like Manny, the big leagues seem a lot like little league. He has fun playing baseball—and it shows.

had with that was watching Junior bringing his entire family to the park every night until he hit the milestone. We gave him the hardest time because it took him like 10 days. Ken Sr. would come into the clubhouse and declare he was tired of having to hang around the whole game waiting for his son to hit a homer. "Hey, Junior, hurry up. Your mother and I are ready to go home," he'd say.

When Junior finally hit 500, he was in St. Louis and the fan gave him back the ball. Junior was so blown away that he invited that fan to the All-Star Game at his expense. What also was cool was how all his teammates went to the plate to celebrate with

The week ahead

June 13-15

Neighorly Midwesterners

Twins vs. Brewers ranks low

on the scale of rivalries, according to Angels center fielder and former Minnesota star Torii Hunter. After tasting the Dodgers-Angels rivalry for the first time last month, Hunter said, "It beats Milwaukee-Minnesota. (The fans there) would be drinking and hugging. ... We had fighting in Orange County." This round of upper Midwest pleasantries will take place at Miller Park.

June 16-18

It seems like October

A World Series preview,

perhaps, when Boston begins a series at Philadelphia? Since former Phillies manager Terry Francona took over the Red Sox in 2004, the Sox are 10-2 against the Phillies. In those 12 games, Phils pitchers had a combined 7.55 ERA, and Manny Ramirez torched them for a .400 average, six homers and 24 RBIs.

Glad to see Vlad

The Mets' series against the Angels in Anaheim could feature a premier pitching matchup: Johan Santana against John Lackey. While with the Twins, Santana was a pedestrian 2-3 with a 4.05 ERA against the Angels, but the lefthander limited Vladimir Guerrero to three hits in 16 at-bats.

June 17-19

How things have changed

Cubs manager Lou Piniella

will be in a familiar setting with an unfamiliar feel when his club plays at Tampa Bay. Under Piniella, who managed the Rays from 2003-05, the team was 85 games below .500. The vastly improved Rays have their top two starting pitchers, James Shields and Scott Kazmir, lined up for this series.

He's only hot for Houston

Astros shortstop Miguel Tejada can expect a chilly reception when he appears in Baltimore for the first time since being traded last winter. After sleepwalking through his final season with the Orioles, Tejada has been a heavy hitter and an energizing force with Houston. —Gerry Fraley

7 things you need to know about ... the first-place Cubs

1

The Friendly Confines are really friendly. The Cubs have built the best record in the National League by being by far the best team at home. They are 26-8 at Wrigley Field, including a 10-9 victory over the Rockies in late May during which they overcame a 9-1 deficit. It was the kind of game that legends—and inestimable confidence—are built around. The Cubs are first in the N.L. in runs scored (355) and fourth in fewest runs allowed (260). “Last year, we thought we could win,” shortstop Ryan Theriot says, “and this year we know we can.”

2

The starting pitching is skin deep. Carlos Zambrano (8-2, 3.01 ERA) and Ryan Dempster (7-2, 2.90) have been stellar. After those two, it's shaky. Ted Lilly has yet to round into his '07 form, Rich Hill lost his command and was banished to the minors, and Jason Marquis has an ERA over 5.00. That puts pressure on the bullpen (fourth in the N.L. in innings pitched), especially the middle relievers. Sean Gallagher, 22, is 3-2 in six starts and could be a big help. “We're thinner than people think we are,” manager Lou Piniella says.

3

The addition of center fielder Jim Edmonds may not be a plus. “His bat is so slow, and sometimes he just doesn't pay attention much,” one scout says of Edmonds, who hit .178 in 26 games with the Padres before being released and got off to a poor start with the Cubs. “If it doesn't work, Edmonds can drag down a team,” another scout says. Edmonds has perked up of late, though, and is hitting .277 in 16 games with Chicago.

6

Carlos Marmol and Kerry Wood know how to lock it down. Marmol is as good as any eighth-inning specialist, and Wood has settled into the closer role. Marmol has allowed only 17 hits in 38½ innings and has struck out 57 batters; Wood has converted 17 of 21 save opportunities.



Fukudome won't swing until he sees just the right pitch.

4

Patience is one of their virtues. The Cubs are making opposing pitchers work harder this year. They are seeing an average of 3.85 pitches per plate appearance, fifth in the N.L. Last year, they averaged 3.73, which ranked ninth. The difference helps explain why the Cubs lead the league in on-base percentage. Much of the credit for the discipline goes to Japanese import Kosuke Fukudome, who sets a standard for his teammates by coaxing 4.26 pitches per appearance.

7

Piniella has a fire in his belly. “This is Lou's chance and he knows it,” says a veteran scout. “He wants to win another World Series so badly, and then I think he's in the mix for making the Hall of Fame. I know Lou's strengths and shortcomings, and he is exactly right for this team.” Piniella is cautious: “Talking about the best team in baseball or the best record in baseball on the first of June, I think it's overkill,” he says. “A lot of things can happen.”

—John Rawlings



Marquis is one of a few Cubs starters who are struggling.

5

They need to take a road course. The Cubs are 13-16

away from Wrigley. They're scoring 6.4 runs per game at home and 4.5 on the road. They are currently in the middle of a big test: From the beginning of June through the first week of July, the Cubs play 23 of 33 games on the road.

SCOUTS VIEWS

Observations and opinions from major league scouts

An SOS for the Mariners

What has gone wrong in Seattle? Projected to contend in the American League West, the Mariners entered the week buried in the cellar, 16½ games behind the first-place Angels and 8½ behind the third-place Rangers.

A National League scout suggests the Mariners were overvalued from the start. They are "a very poorly put together team," he says. He contends Mariners general manager Bill Bavasi was guilty of not addressing offensive shortcomings. The departure of free-agent outfielder Jose Guillen, who drove in 99 runs last season, was a major blow, and no one in the '08 lineup works counts. Seattle ranks last in the league in on-base percentage, next-to-last in runs scored and batting average.

The scout adds that the body language of Mariners pitchers indicates they are not comfortable working with catcher Kenji Johjima, who clings to the Japanese style of game-calling, in which breaking pitches set up the fastball. That runs counter to the major leagues' pattern of attacking with fastballs early in counts. The Seattle staff's 4.79 ERA ranks 13th in the A.L. —Gerry Fraley



Johjima's breaking ball-first pattern is a break with the usual style—and perhaps unsettling.

Beckett or Halladay?

We asked several scouts to pick the majors' top starting pitcher, and they identified Boston righthander Josh Beckett and Toronto righty Roy Halladay as the best. Beckett rated a slight edge because of his remarkable postseason success.

"He's got all that Texas cowboy stuff about him, and he's got the (World Series) rings," an American League scout says. "His stuff is tremendous. So are his intensity and his preparation. He really believes that he's the best, and that means a lot. (Tom) Seaver was that way, and he backed it up."

Halladay's determination to finish what he starts made him the choice of a National League scout.

"He could have pitched in the '60s or the '70s," the scout says of Halladay. "He goes to the bullpen with the ball half an hour before the game and does not want to give it back until the game is over. He wants to get all

27 outs."

Halladay entered the week with five of Toronto's six complete games. Among other major league teams, only the Indians' entire staff can match Holiday's figure. —G.F.

They'll show up in the Show before you know it

Though the Rays took Griffin (Ga.) High School shortstop Tim Beckham with the first choice in the amateur draft last week, that doesn't mean he'll reach the majors first. The picks you should watch for, perhaps as soon as this summer:

■ **Aaron Crow, No. 9, Nationals** (RHP, Missouri). Crow was probably the best pitcher in the draft, a starter who throws in the mid-90s and finished the year 13-0 with a 2.35 ERA. He had a stretch of 43 consecutive scoreless innings. Crow's off-speed stuff is not exceptional, but he has tremendous control.

■ **Justin Smoak, No. 11, Rangers** (1B, South Carolina). Smoak, a switch hitter coming off a season in which he batted .383 with 23 home runs, figures to be a top-notch power hitter and an above-average defensive player at a position where the Rangers are thin.

■ **Brett Wallace, No. 13, Cardinals** (3B, Arizona State). Wallace's favorite movie is *The Natural*, which is fitting because he's as pure a hitter as you'll find. He was the Pac-10 player of the year in 2007 and



Crow seems destined to serve a long term in Washington.

followed that by winning the conference's triple crown for the second straight year. His hitting (a .418 average, 21 homers and 81 RBIs for a Sun Devils team competing in the NCAA's postseason) more than makes up for some fielding deficiencies.

■ **Andrew Cashner, No. 19, Cubs** (RHP, TCU). The 6-6 Cashner is a hard-throwing reliever with big strikeout numbers and some control

issues (80 strikeouts and 27 walks in 54⅓ innings). He could be converted back into a starter, his role in junior college.

■ **Joshua Fields, No. 20 Mariners** (RHP, Georgia). The Braves made Fields a second-round pick last year (No. 69 overall) but failed to sign him. He has 16 saves and a 2.27 ERA this year, with 56 strikeouts in 31⅓ innings, for a Bulldogs team that is still playing. Many teams are wary of drafting college relievers, but Fields displays a hard-to-resist closer mentality. —Sean Deveney

Kurt Busch used to have the corner on racing controversy and fan abuse. Now the boo birds flock around younger brother Kyle, who appears ready to take Kurt's notoriety—and success—to another level.

With these brothers, the biggest rivalries aren't the sibling kind

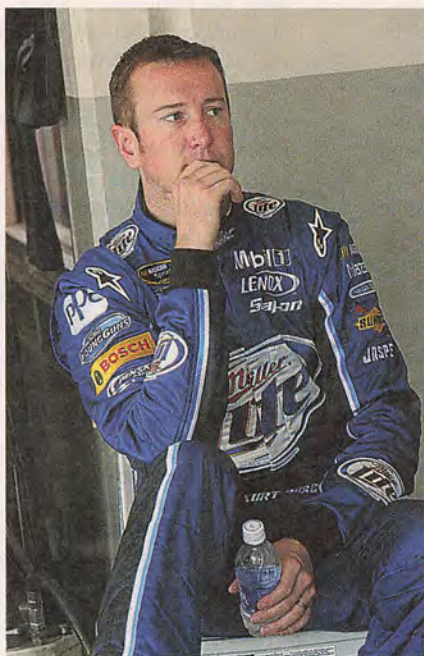
By Mike Hembree

Remember when fans considered Kurt Busch Public Enemy No. 1? Remember when Busch and Tony Stewart were nasty rivals? And when Busch's nose met Jimmy Spencer's fist in a heated moment?

Those seem like distant memories from a faded high school yearbook. Nowadays, Kurt Busch isn't even the most reviled member of a small sampling that includes only members of his family.

That title is reserved for younger brother Kyle, who makes his sibling's past troubles seem like mere childhood tantrums. If Kurt had put a frog in the teacher's desk, it would follow that Kyle might set the desk on fire.

Kyle, however, seems to have this neat parallel universe thing happening. Every time he irritates NASCAR Nation with his aggressive driving or bad boy attitude, he follows it up with a sensational race in his No. 18 Toyota. While boos rain down on him from the stands, he's cashing check after check. The story this season has been Kyle Busch, and he's stirring competitive waters that have been



While Kurt Busch (left) contemplates a disappointing season, his younger brother is on top of the world.



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calm for too long.

And to make the story even more interesting, getting lost in Kyle's wake is Kurt, who has almost seven years and a Cup championship on his brother but still seems to be losing his birthright.

While Kyle has been carving out his niche this season, Kurt has been puttering along like the guy who follows the elephants with a large shovel. Kurt is far behind his brother, who leads Sprint Cup drivers in points. Through the race at Pocono, Kyle had four wins, Kurt zero. Through the first 14 races, Kurt had beaten Kyle only four times.

Kyle no longer can be known as Shrub—or the smaller of the Busches.

"The only difference in them coming along," says their dad, Tom, "is that Kyle did everything two or three years younger. They almost did identical things; he was just younger. They both were fortunate enough to win their first race. When they both got to Truck, they won races. If you look at the amount of time they've been in a racecar, it's about the same period. Kyle just got the early start."

Kyle and Kurt claim they don't have an intense brother-vs.-brother rivalry. Boy, is that true this season. Kurt's rivalry is with middle-of-the-pack guys like David Gilliland and Jamie McMurray; Kyle is jousting with the likes of Carl Edwards, Jeff Gordon and Stewart while competing for the first of what could be multiple championships.

Additionally, Kyle has supplanted Kurt—zoomed by him, actually—in the Cumulative Boo Index. Once upon a time, Kurt was pounded relentlessly with verbal abuse from the grandstands; now Kyle absorbs what might be the most vociferous fan hostility since the salad days of Darrell Waltrip.

This is a strange dichotomy at work—one brother rising dramatically while the other struggles to find what once was championship footing. Kyle is the new focus of fans, and Kurt, for better or worse, runs in the shadows of his 2004 championship, his 2008 hopes on the verge of collapse barring a sudden turnaround.

Early in Kyle's career, he labored under the cloud of guilt by association. His brother's troubles also were his. Now Kyle is old enough—and good enough—to make his own troubles, and he's doing so with an earnestness his brother might even envy.

SN

Mike Hembree is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene.

Read more from Hembree at scenedaily.com.

speedreads

Races at Michigan are among my favorites. They typically take less than three hours, the speeds are fast, and fuel mileage often comes into play.

A fun Michigan fact: A Chevrolet hasn't won there since 2001, when Jeff Gordon took the checkered flag from the pole position in the June race.

If I could pick one guy to own in any fantasy league for the next 10 races, it'd be Tony Stewart. This is the time of year he starts heating up at tracks that suit his talents.

—Roger Kuznia

For a guy who usually plays his cards close to the vest, **Mark Martin** provides a shocker when he all but promises to win the July 27 Allstate 400 at the Brickyard at Indy. "I'm planning

on winning the Brickyard in the No. 8 car," Martin says. "We've got the stuff. We've got the team. The cars are awesome on flat tracks (like) Phoenix and Richmond. I have never planned on anything more than my plan for the Brickyard. That's the crown jewel. If you look at how that car ran at Phoenix (April 12), I believe we can adapt that setup to work there." Martin looked like a winner at Phoenix until he pitted for fuel with 10 laps left instead of gambling for the victory. At Richmond three weeks later, he had a top five car all night and finished third. The car the No. 8 team used at Phoenix and Richmond hasn't run since, but it will be back at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

> This is why they call it Silly Season: **Jamie McMurray** has vigorously denied published reports he had asked for his release from Roush Fenway Racing—and that Roush had asked him to leave. McMurray says he has talked over the situation with owner **Jack Roush** and team president **Geoff Smith**. McMurray:



"When all of it came up, we just all talked, and I never asked to get out of my contract, and they never said they were going to release me from my contract. There was never any discus-

sion of any of that. So we just were all trying to figure out where it came from."

> **Clint Bowyer** says he will remain with Richard Childress Racing through 2009 and probably beyond that. "Richard exercised his option for '09, and we are just working on a long-term deal right now," Bowyer says. > Food for thought: In late April, **Tony Stewart** acknowledged talking to Haas CNC Racing about a deal that reportedly includes an ownership interest in that Chevrolet Sprint Cup team. **Joe Custer**, Haas CNC's general manager, flew to Eldora Speedway in Ohio for Stewart's Prelude to the Dream charity race last week on the team plane of Joe Gibbs Racing, Stewart's current boss. Stewart's winning late-model dirt car was sponsored by Bass Pro Shops, which sponsors the DEI Chevrolet Cup car of **Martin Truex**. There were enough members of the Chevrolet motorsports brass at the half-mile dirt track that you might have thought Chevy had called a strategic planning meeting. —Reid Spencer



If you want to find Martin after the Brickyard at Indy, just look in victory lane.

MAN TIPS

TIPS FOR MEN.

FROM MEN.

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One year later, France is still prominent on NASCAR's map

On June 4, 2007, while Martin Truex was running away with the rain-delayed Sprint Cup race at Dover International Speedway, Bill France Jr. passed away after a lengthy illness.

During his 31-year tenure as NASCAR's president, France increased stock car racing's visibility exponentially, elevating it from a regional sport in the Southeast to a national phenomenon. He ascended to NASCAR's top job in 1972—succeeding his father, Big Bill France—a move that coincided with the signing of R.J. Reynolds' Winston brand as the title sponsor of NASCAR's top series. It became a long-term relationship and one of the most fruitful and productive marketing partnerships in the history of major league sports.

France, likewise, handed over the chairman and CEO role to his son, Brian France, in 2003 after helping secure NASCAR's future with the lucrative long-term television contract he negotiated in 1999. In 2004, Nextel succeeded Winston as the title sponsor of the series, and NASCAR's postseason Chase—brought about by France—was born.

NASCAR racing changed immensely during Bill France's lifetime, and it also has achieved significant milestones in the year since his death.

Nine days after France died, Dale Earnhardt Jr. announced his agreement to sign with Hendrick Motorsports—a one-man realignment of NASCAR's star power. Eleven days after that, Colombian-born open-wheel star Juan Pablo Montoya became the first driver of Hispanic descent to win at NASCAR's highest level when he took the checkered flag at Infineon Raceway.

Since France's death, the Car of Tomorrow has become the full-time racecar in the Cup Series, to mixed reviews—raves for its ability to protect competitors, reservations for the quality of racing it has produced on high-speed downforce tracks.

On September 6, 2007, Joe Gibbs Racing announced a switch from Chevrolet to Toyota, effective in 2008. The Japanese carmaker, winless in its 2007 debut season, now has five victories in 13 races this year, all with Gibbs. Kyle Busch, who was dropped by Hendrick in favor of Earnhardt and picked up by Gibbs, has four of those.

The average pump price for regular gasoline is almost a dollar higher than it was at this time last year, and attendance at Cup races has suffered sig-



Bill France Jr. didn't just embrace change—he pushed for it. He would have been proud to see Montoya, an open-wheel star, become the first Hispanic driver to win a Cup race.

nificantly. Television ratings, however, have rebounded, suggesting fans are staying home and satisfying their racing appetites on TV.

Brian France is the ultimate decision maker in the family-founded organization, but the day-to-day operation of the sport resides largely in the capable hands of president Mike Helton, who commands a healthy respect throughout the garage.

There are, of course, a multitude of things that have not changed in the year without Bill France. First and foremost: Those who compete in the sport, those who run the sport, those who cover the sport and—most important—those who pay to watch it still care intensely about its direction and future.

That, in itself, is a glowing tribute to the remarkable legacy of Bill France Jr. —Reid Spencer

Pit Box

NASCAR experts Roger Kuznia and Reid Spencer size up the upcoming race—and each other's analysis—every week in the Pit Box. This week: LifeLock 400

Who will win at Michigan?

1:30 p.m. ET Sunday, TNT

Roger: Carl Edwards' early-season thunder has been trumped by Joe Gibbs' Toyotas as the season has worn on, but Michigan is a perfect place for Edwards to return to victory lane. He's the defending champion of this race, and he also won earlier this year at California—a track similar to Michigan. The faster the track, the better Edwards does.

Last week: Roger picked Kyle Busch, who finished last, and Reid picked Kasey Kahne, who won the Pocono 500 for his second victory in three races.

Reid: Roger is barking up the right tree with Edwards—but he's on the wrong limb. Greg Biffle, Edwards' Roush teammate, has been tantalizingly close to victory a few times lately. He had the fastest car at Darlington—until it broke. He ran second to Kasey Kahne in the Coca-Cola 600 and led at Dover before finishing third. This is the week Biffle wins.

Jeremy Shockey and the Giants need each other.

Breaking up is oh-so-wrong to do

By Clifton Brown

cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com

Maybe the Giants and Jeremy Shockey should seek marriage counseling. Because for both parties, making up is better than breaking up.

Shockey, who broke his leg in New York's 14th game last season, became aloof and distant after the Giants had the nerve to win the Super Bowl without him. He skipped the victory parade. He passed on the White House visit. He even stayed away from the ring presentation at Tiffany's, drawing an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty from Fifth Avenue shoppers. He has been rehabbing in Miami, acting like he needs MapQuest to find the Giants' training facility. Shockey has reportedly been running in sand to strengthen his leg, but his progress will be hard to gauge until he returns to the practice field.

The Giants discussed trading him to the Saints during draft weekend, making Shockey's status with the team even more tenuous. Now some believe the Giants are better off without him. The theory is that Eli Manning has more freedom to blossom as the team's offensive leader without Shockey's big ego and strong personality around.

Don't buy that. Trading Shockey, still one of the league's most talented tight ends, would be the wrong move for the Giants, just as trying to force

his way out of New York would be the wrong move for Shockey. He is just 27 and one of only four tight ends to catch 57 passes or more in each of the past four seasons; Tony Gonzalez, Antonio Gates and Jason Witten are the others.

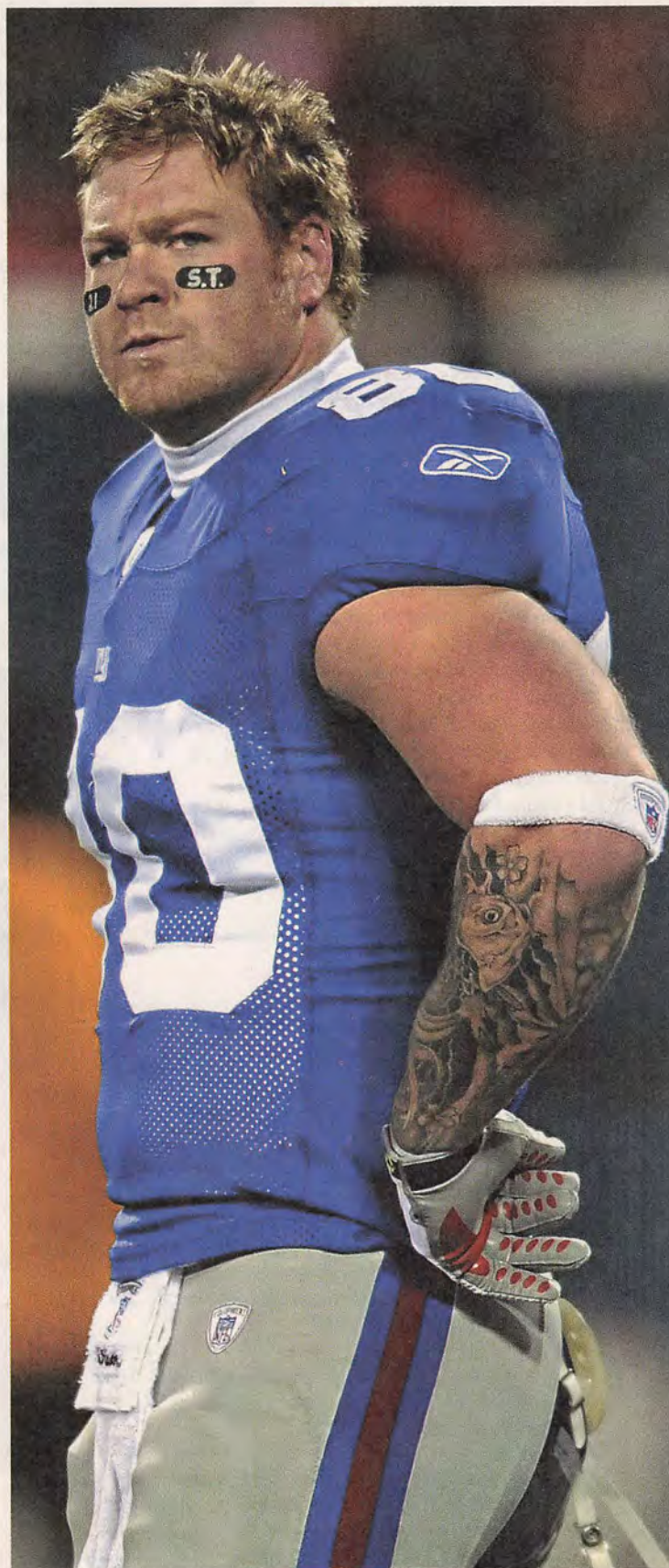
Shockey is an emotional player who sometimes implodes for no good reason. But this time, Shockey has reason to be ticked off. Phil Simms, a former Giant who now is an analyst for CBS, can relate.

"For any football player, being injured is a helpless feeling because no matter how good you are the team immediately moves on without you," says Simms, who watched Jeff Hostetler quarterback the Giants to victory in Super Bowl 25 while he was injured. "It's hard to describe unless you've been there."

"Now the stuff that Shockey's hearing, that the Giants are better without him, has to hurt. He's got to be thinking, 'Are you kidding me?' I can't speak for him, but that kind of talk makes you think about getting a fresh start somewhere else."

Even before this rift, Shockey had complained about his role in the Giants' offense. He wants to catch 80 passes a season but has averaged 62 in his six years with the team. Still, Shockey should be smart enough to realize he's in an excellent situation. Manning came into his own during the championship run, and a wide receiver unit featuring Plaxico Burress, Amani Toomer, Steve Smith,

**Complacency
can kill teams
trying to repeat,
but there is
zero chance
Shockey will be
complacent,
not with people
questioning
his worth.**



Granted, Shockey's behavior this offseason hasn't been ideal. But it hasn't been such that he and the Giants should part ways, either.

Sinorice Moss, David Tyree and rookie Mario Manningham hasn't been this deep since Shockey joined the Giants in 2002.

Shockey may never catch 80 passes with the Giants because they have too many other weapons. But that means the team is better equipped to reach more Super Bowls—and to keep opposing defenses from loading up to stop Shockey.

Giants coaches and players have done a smart thing recently by punching holes in the perception that the team is better without Shockey.

"I think that is demeaning to both players, to Eli and to Jeremy," says Giants tight ends coach Mike Pope. "To think that one player has to be out of the picture before another player can surface, that is ludicrous."

There are valid criticisms of Shockey. He drops too many passes. Sometimes he speaks before he thinks, leading to headlines that elevate coach Tom Coughlin's blood pressure. And if Shockey spent more offseason time with the Giants and less time in Florida, he would likely have better chemistry with Manning.

Yet Shockey has always been a fiery player, and his emotion could be valuable next season. Complacency can kill teams trying to repeat, but there is zero chance Shockey will be complacent, not with people questioning his worth.

When Michael Strahan did not report to training camp last season and considered retirement, Coughlin and general manager Jerry Reese played it cool. When Strahan came back, they welcomed him and moved on.

"How'd that work out?" says Simms. "My old coach, Bill Parcells, once said, 'I'm not in the habit of getting rid of good football players.' And Coughlin reminds me more of Parcells than any other current coach."

The Giants should keep Shockey, and Shockey should do a Strahan by answering his critics with a stellar season. Some relationships are worth saving. The marriage between Shockey and the Giants is one of them. **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

For an inside look at veterans facing important training camps this summer, read Clifton Brown this week at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Patriots offensive tackle Nick Kaczur is arrested for illegal possession of prescription painkillers and reportedly wears a wire in a sting operation. Bills running back Marshawn Lynch is investigated for his alleged involvement in a hit-and-run incident. So, Roger Goodell, how's that crackdown on player conduct going?

Bill Parcells now says Jason Taylor is unlikely to be traded. Even if they don't get along, Parcells can appreciate Taylor's ability to get to quarterbacks.

Pacman Jones returned an interception for a touchdown at a Cowboys practice. Hopefully, he didn't celebrate by going to a strip club.

To preserve his arm, Peyton Manning is cutting down on his offseason throwing. That leaves even more time to make commercials.

INSIDE DISH

to be the starter. ➤ **Deuce McAllister** is coming off surgery on both knees, and **Reggie Bush** has yet to be an effective inside runner. That leaves the Saints still searching for a go-to back, and **Pierre Thomas** could be that guy. In the Saints' final game last season, he rushed for 105 yards on 20 carries, and he caught 12 passes for 121 yards and a touchdown. Thomas backed up that effort with a strong showing at a recent Saints minicamp, and coach

Sean Payton also praised Thomas' pass-blocking ability. Sounds like a player who will be difficult to keep on the bench. ➤ The Chiefs have taken steps to improve **Brodie Croyle**'s comfort level as their starting quarterback, including simplifying the terminology in the offense. The Chiefs had 12 draft picks but didn't select a quarterback. New coordinator **Chan Gailey** insists Croyle can be a franchise QB, and the Chiefs are giving him the chance to prove it. After next season, the Chiefs want to know for certain whether Croyle is their guy. ➤ The release of **Travis Henry** opens the door for **Selvin Young** to become the Broncos' feature back in his second season. However, Young will have to earn it. Coach **Mike Shanahan** still has a large group of running backs to choose from, including veteran **Michael Pittman**, rookie **Ryan Torain** and second-year player **Andre Hall**. Shanahan has never been shy about shuttling backs, and there will be a battle for playing time during training camp and pre-season. For now, Young has the edge.

He averaged 5.2 yards per carry last

Warner is an important Plan B for the Cardinals because of concerns about Plan A.

season, and none of the other backs can match his explosiveness. Shanahan's main concern about Young has been durability, but Young has bulked up to 212 pounds, hoping to end concern about his readiness to carry the ball 20 times a game. ➤ WR **Arnaz Battle**, who led the 49ers in receiving yards (600) and touchdowns (five) last season, is dropping on the depth chart. Battle angered coaches by skipping voluntary workouts while free-agent signee **Bryant Johnson** has impressed them during those sessions. Former Ram **Isaac Bruce**, another offseason acquisition, is also favored by the coaching staff because of his familiarity with the system run by new coordinator **Mike Martz**. With Bryant and Bruce in the picture, Battle could find himself scrambling for playing time. ➤ Houston's **Rick Smith** is the league's youngest general manager at 38, and he's also among the most secure. With a new four-year contract extension through 2012, Smith has the freedom to continue building the team for the long haul. Coming off their first .500 season, the next goal for the Texans is to make their first playoff appearance.



SPOTLIGHT: POSITION BATTLES

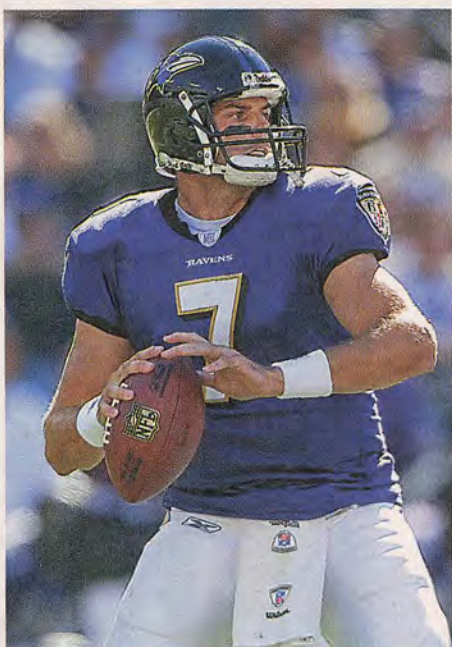
The starting quarterback job in Baltimore is **Kyle Boller's** to lose, but he has very little upside and panics inside the red zone. Second-year pro **Troy Smith** has improved his accuracy and grasped the offense and has other intangibles such as leadership that Boller lacks. Smith could make a run at beating out Boller. Strong-armed rookie **Joe Flacco**, the team's first-round pick out of Delaware, is the quarterback of the future, but the Ravens won't use him unless both Smith and Boller get hurt. ... **Stacy Andrews**, who has been tabbed as the Bengals' franchise player, and four-time Pro Bowl pick **Willie Anderson** can both

stake worthy claims to Cincinnati's right tackle job. Andrews started 11 games there in place of Anderson (left knee, right heel) in 2007, but the now-healthy Anderson is making a strong bid to win his spot back. Andrews is a bruising blocker who has improved in pass protection. Anderson is a road-grading run blocker, shutdown pass protector and

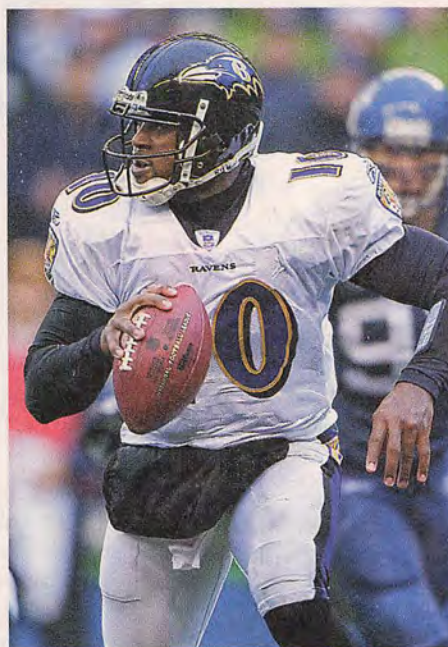
the most respected player on the team. If Anderson reclaims his job, Andrews could play either guard spot. ... Chiefs MLB **Napoleon Harris** must lift his play a notch to avoid getting pushed to the bench. He led the team in tackles last season but was inconsistent and made too few plays. The Chiefs signed free agent **Demorrio Williams** and won't

the advantage. ... **Lawrence Timmons**, a 2007 first-round pick, will get a chance to challenge incumbent **Larry Foote** for the Steelers' outside linebacker job. Timmons is fast, quick and athletic but must show he is capable of handling all his assignments, especially in coverage. Foote takes good angles to the ball but can get moved out of position.

hesitate to start him on the outside, with **Donnie Edwards** moving into the middle. Williams is a good athlete who covers a lot of ground. ... Jets QB **Kellen Clemens'** obvious advantage in arm strength gives him a major edge over **Chad Pennington** in practices, where quarterbacks can't be touched. But Clemens needs to work on his pocket presence, which the Jets won't be able to judge until they play preseason games. If coach **Eric Mangini** makes a decision early in training camp, Clemens likely will be the starter. But if Mangini waits until after one or two August games, Pennington may have



At this point, it would be a surprise if Boller lived up to his first-round draft status.



Viewed as a project a year ago, Smith could make things interesting in Baltimore.

'When (starting center) Dominic Raiola is in the game, I'll be in the game. ... Nobody gets to touch his butt but me—and his wife.'

—Lions QB Jon Kitna, addressing talk that second-year player Drew Stanton might put pressure on him for the starting job. That scenario is unlikely.

Stanton is trying to get comfortable in new coordinator Jim Colletto's offense, and the unit looks much sharper with Kitna under center.



A real QB competition in Chicago—finally

If Rex Grossman emerges as the starting quarterback this season, it won't be because the Bears handed him the job. He'll have to earn it.

Grossman's performance sank last season, and he hasn't been on top of his game since he was NFC offensive player of the month in September 2006. Kyle Orton had a solid three-start audition at the end of last season and has been the sharper of the two through spring drills. Orton is far more advanced than he was in 2005, when he led Chicago to a division title as a rookie, and is the safer choice at this point.

Don't expect a decision until midway through preseason at the earliest, but look for Orton to win out.

AFC

Focus on RUNN

1 Jaguars Defenses never get a break against Jacksonville. With his explosive inside running and sure hands, Maurice Jones-Drew complements Fred Taylor's cutback style. Greg Jones is a versatile lead blocker.

2 Chargers LaDainian Tomlinson isn't showing any slippage, but depth is an issue. Michael Turner is gone, so Darren Sproles will get a larger role and rookie Jacob Hester will fill in at running back and fullback.

3 Steelers First-round pick Rashard Mendenhall will pound out tough yards inside and complement two-time Pro Bowler Willie Parker. Mewelde Moore should get plenty of pass-catching opportunities.

4 Colts Versatile Joseph Addai will get ample help from Dominic Rhodes, who's back after a year in Oakland. Depth will come from Kenton Keith or rookie Mike Hart.

5 Chiefs New coordinator Chan Gailey's offense will be built around Larry Johnson, who needs better blocking to bounce back strong. Rookie Jamaal Charles provides what Johnson doesn't—a legitimate breakaway threat.

6 Ravens Willis McGahee is an outside runner who has the power to work inside. He has improved as a pass catcher. With no proven backup, the team will look at rookie Ray Rice, who runs with a low center of gravity.

7 Raiders Justin Fargas heads an impressive stable that includes rookie Darren McFadden and short-yardage ace Michael Bush. Look for the hard-nosed Fargas and speedy McFadden to provide a nice combo.

8 Bills Marshawn Lynch is a between-the-tackles workhorse with outside speed. Fred Jackson provides a change of pace with his slashing quickness. Both will get help from fullback Darian Barnes, a pile-driving blocker.

9 Browns Jamal Lewis re-established himself as a top power back in 2008, but how much does he have left? No. 2 Jason Wright will be pushed by Jerome Harrison. Lawrence Vickers has grown into the fullback job.

10 Patriots Laurence Maroney appears on the verge of becoming a legit No. 1. He is backed up by solid veteran Sammy Morris, with jack-of-all-trades Kevin Faulk available on

third down. Heath Evans is a solid fullback.

11 Jets Thomas Jones is a solid runner who needs better blocking. No. 2 Leon Washington is explosive but fragile, which explains the signing of Jesse Chatman. Fullback Tony Richardson still is a Pro Bowl-caliber blocker.

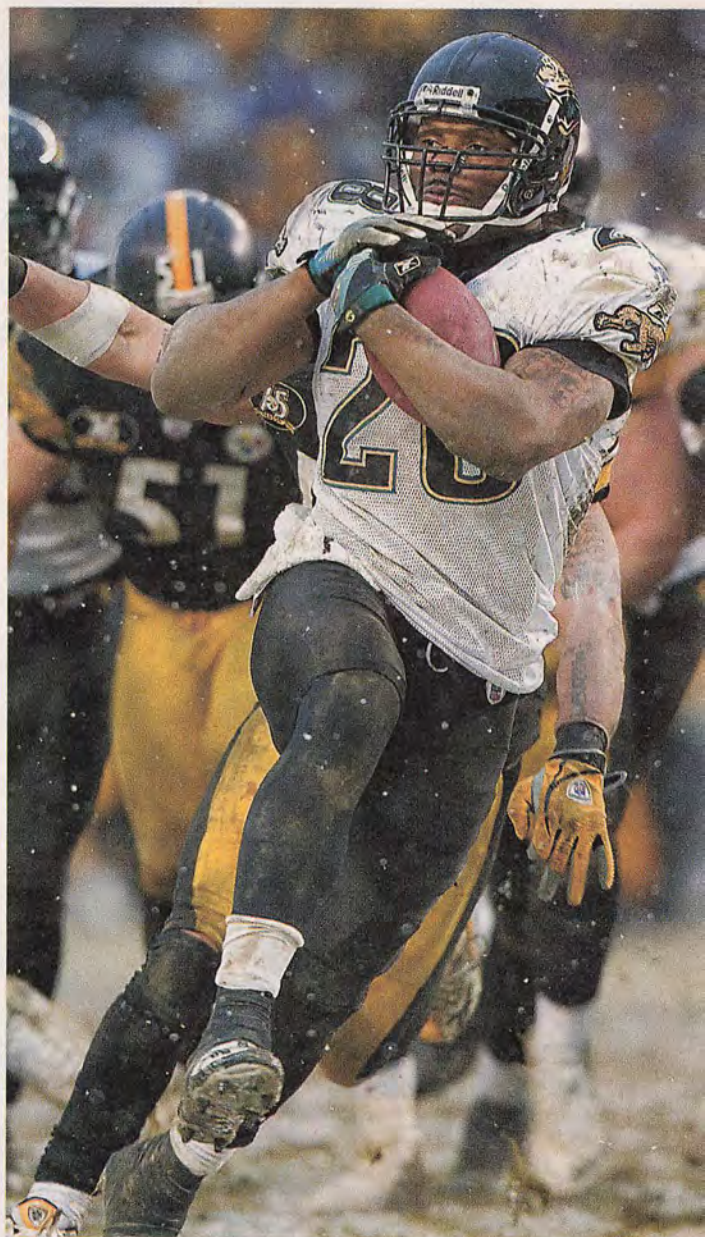
12 Titans The 1,110 yards LenDale White rushed for last season were a welcome contribution for a team that has questions behind him: Chris Henry, who had limited success last year, and versatile rookie Chris Johnson.

13 Dolphins The 1-2 punch of Ronnie Brown and Ricky Williams comes with issues: Williams has played just 13 games in three years; Brown is coming off a torn ACL. Before the injury, Brown was playing at a Pro Bowl level.

14 Broncos With the release of Travis Henry, look for Selvin Young and newcomer Michael Pittman to share duties. Rookie Ryan Torain, who is physical and suited for the one-cut zone-blocking scheme, is a dark horse.

15 Bengals Rudi Johnson has to prove himself after a poor 2007. He has looked strong in offseason workouts. Versatile Kenny Watson is the top backup, and DeDe Dorsey is primed to steal the No. 3 role from Chris Perry.

16 Texans Ahman Green, Chris Brown and Chris Taylor all have injury-plagued pasts. Rookie Steve Slaton is slated for third-down duty. The only sure thing is bruising fullback Vonta Leach.



Fred Taylor is one of the league's best, but the Jaguars' 1-2 punch is why they're No. 1.

TOP
5

1. LaDainian Tomlinson, Chargers
2. Joseph Addai, Colts
3. Larry Johnson, Chiefs
4. Fred Taylor, Jaguars
5. Willie Parker, Steelers

WINNING BACKS

NFC

1 Vikings They have the best 1-2 punch in the league with Adrian Peterson and Chester Taylor. Peterson has a rare blend of speed and power and freezes defenders with his moves. Taylor is less explosive but runs just as hard.

2 Eagles Brian Westbrook is the NFL's most dangerous all-around back. He's almost unstoppable in the open field. Correll Buckhalter is a reliable power runner, and newcomer Lorenzo Booker is a pass-catching threat.

3 Redskins Clinton Portis can still break open a game on any carry. Ladell Betts hits the holes quickly, has good acceleration and is an excellent receiver. Fullback Mike Sellers is a powerful blocker and capable short-yardage back.

4 Giants Few teams can match the depth in the Giants' backfield. Brandon Jacobs is a load but must become more durable. Derrick Ward averaged 4.8 yards per carry in 2007, and Ahmad Bradshaw has the speed to become a star.

5 Cowboys Marion Barber will get his shot to start. He's a battering ram who can get the tough yards and close out games. The team hopes rookie Felix Jones will provide the big-play threat it lacked the past couple of years.

6 Rams Steven Jackson has an imposing blend of speed, power and pass-catching ability, but durability was a problem in 2007. Antonio Pittman and Brian Leonard haven't established themselves as viable options.

7 49ers Frank Gore is a tough runner between the tackles and has the receiving skills to thrive in new coordinator Mike Martz's offense. Michael Robinson and DeShaun Foster are solid backups with good receiving skills.



Just wait until the NFL gets a full dose of Peterson, who rushed for 1,341 yards in only 14 games (nine starts) as a rookie last season.

TOP
5

1. Adrian Peterson, Vikings
2. Brian Westbrook, Eagles
3. Steven Jackson, Rams
4. Frank Gore, 49ers
5. Clinton Portis, Redskins

8 Falcons Not only can newcomer Michael Turner pound defenses with his 237-pound body, but he has big-play speed. Jerious Norwood also has breakaway ability, and Ovie Mughelli is a bruising lead blocker.

9 Packers Ryan Grant was a revelation in his first year as a starter. He's big, moves the pile and is a home run threat. Brandon Jackson is shifty and can churn out yards between the tackles. DeShawn Wynn must mature fast.

10 Buccaneers Even without Cadillac Williams, who will spend most of '08 rehabbing his knee, this is a strong unit. Earnest Graham is a workhorse, and Warrick Dunn and Michael Bennett provide a change of pace.

11 Cardinals Edgerrin James still can squeeze 5 yards out of nothing, but he doesn't provide many big plays. Backup Marcel Shipp is a tough inside runner but lacks speed.

12 Panthers With rookie Jonathan Stewart's strength inside and DeAngelo Williams' speed outside, the Panthers appear to have a nice combination. But Stewart is coming off toe surgery and Williams still has to prove himself.

13 Saints Reggie Bush, who averaged 3.7 yards per carry and dropped too many passes in '08, must prove himself all over again. Deuce McAllister is coming off surgery on both knees. Pierre Thomas has proved he can fill in effectively—at least for a short stretch.

14 Seahawks They made a lot of changes, but it's hard to say they'll be better. Julius Jones hits the hole hard but averaged 3.6 yards for Dallas in '07. T.J. Duckett has good size.

15 Bears Cedric Benson's job is in jeopardy after he was arrested twice this spring. If Benson goes, rookie Matt Forte likely will start, with Adrian Peterson as the backup.

16 Lions Third-round pick Kevin Smith likely will start, and his one-cut style fits the team's new zone-blocking scheme. Tatum Bell is the biggest name among the backups.

INSIDE THE AFC

At 21, Houston's Okoye is growing into his position

Texans coach Gary Kubiak is calling second-year DT Amobi Okoye, who turned 21 this week, the most improved player on the team. The coaches hope his big offseason translates to more consistent play. In particular, the Texans want to see Okoye, who finished with 5½ sacks last season, become better against the run. That's especially important because of DT Travis Johnson's pelvis problem, which prevented him from participating in OTAs.

BALTIMORE ILB Bart Scott, whose sacks total fell from 9½ in 2006 to one largely because he was used more in coverage, will return to a blitzing role. Scott will be helped by the return of LE Trevor Pryce. With Pryce out most of 2007, offenses were able to focus their protection on Scott and OLB Terrell Suggs.

BUFFALO FS Ko Simpson is having a good offseason and is showing no effects of the broken ankle that ended his 2007 season after one game. He is the ideal center fielder because he has good range and the ability to make plays from sideline to sideline.

CINCINNATI RE Antwan Odom has improved his upper-body strength. Now he's concentrating on gaining weight, from 253 to a goal of 265 for camp, so he can become a more physical pass rusher and run stopper.

CLEVELAND Playing time earmarked for OLB Willie McGinest, 36, who has missed offseason workouts for personal reasons, might be better spent on third-year ILB Leon Williams, who is big and athletic enough to play outside.

DENVER LE Ebenezer Ekuban, who missed last season with a ruptured Achilles, may be the team's best run defender. With the Broncos deep in pass-rushing ends, he has the size and speed to slide to tackle in nickel situations.

INDIANAPOLIS Undersized but instinctive third-year WLB Freddy Keiaho is poised for a breakout season. His only drawback is a tendency to be overly aggressive, which can be a problem in coverage. But he is tenacious and has a nose for the ball.

JACKSONVILLE The team is cautiously optimistic about new WR Troy Williamson, who has a reputation for dropping passes. He has caught

virtually everything thrown his way in offseason workouts, though he did the same with the Vikings last offseason only to have a regular season plagued by drops.

KANSAS CITY

FS Jarrad Page (shoulder surgery) has missed offseason practices but is expected back for training camp. Good thing. He has excellent ball skills, the ability to read plays and good range, though he can be a sloppy tackler.

MIAMI Free-agent pickup Ernest Wilford could be a nice complement to speedy WR Ted Ginn. With his size and strength, Wilford (6-4, 218) will help in the intermediate passing game and on third downs. When Ginn isn't open on long routes, Wilford will be a solid second option.

NEW ENGLAND New TE Marcus Pollard—most closely associated with Indianapolis, where he caught 35 TD passes—earned QB Tom Brady's praise during minicamp for picking up the offense so quickly. More a receiver than a blocker, Pollard brings veteran stability to the position.

NEW YORK The team doesn't want to give TE Chris Baker a raise, but it would be risky to trade him. He has excellent hands and is an above-average blocker. Former Packer Bubba Franks, unproven Jason Pociask and first-round pick Dustin Keller are the other tight ends on the roster.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



If Okoye (left) keeps it up this offseason, he'll have Houston's 'Most Improved' honor all sacked up.

OAKLAND WR Drew Carter, fresh off his best season, brings speed, size and sure hands to an offense with no sure-fire No. 1 receiver. At worst, Carter will be the No. 3 receiver behind Javon Walker and Ronald Curry.

PITTSBURGH SS Troy Polamalu prefers resistance training and stretching to weightlifting in the offseason, but he has strayed from that regimen the past two years in order to work out with the team in Pittsburgh. This offseason, he is rehabbing from knee surgery in California and will return to his old ways. He thinks increased weightlifting led to more injuries in 2006 and '07.

SAN DIEGO Veteran C Jeremy Newberry, signed to a one-year deal, will bring experience and nastiness if Nick Hardwick (foot) isn't ready to start the season. Incumbent backup Cory Withrow is an adequate fill-in but is limited athletically.

TENNESSEE TE Alge Crumpler should help in the red zone. His weight is down, and he is showing no ill effects from a knee injury that slowed him last season in Atlanta. He has already developed good chemistry with QB Vince Young.

The Cowboys have it figured out: A happy T.O. is a productive T.O.

By signing Terrell Owens to a four-year deal that includes \$15 million in guaranteed money, the Cowboys made sure he won't be distracted or a distraction in what would have been his contract year. Normally, it's bad business to give guaranteed money to older players because they tend to get hurt often and take long to recover, but Owens, 34, has shown no sign of decline and keeps himself in phenomenal shape.

ARIZONA Coaches like the practice habits of rookie DEs Calais Campbell and Kenny Iwebema. If Campbell, who is 6-8, can keep opponents at bay with his long arms, he could become a force. Iwebema is strong and has solid fundamentals.

ATLANTA CB Chris Houston is expected to retain his starting job, but he's not a lock. His sometimes nonchalant attitude could hurt his chances. Rookie Chevis Jackson and free-agent pickup Von Hutchins are also starting options.

CAROLINA If he stays healthy—he missed 10 games with the Seahawks in '07—D.J. Hackett (6-2, 208) has a chance to fill a big hole in the receiving unit. He's the team's only wideout with good size *and* speed, and his ability to find openings across the middle will be key.

CHICAGO As the offseason program winds down, SS Brandon McGowan appears entrenched as the starter. He is a solid in-the-box performer and a fearless hitter but must prove he can withstand the pounding of the position.

DETROIT No. 3 WR Shaun McDonald led the Lions with 79 receptions last year, but he'll be lucky to catch half that amount in '08 because the team won't use nearly as many multireceiver sets. Still, McDonald's quickness and ability to find openings will continue to make him an important target.

GREEN BAY Rookie QB Brian Brohm already has a solid grasp of his progressions and is doing a good job making adjustments at the line. When training camp opens, he should be ready to run any play.

MINNESOTA CB Charles Gordon, a former undrafted free agent, continues to make a name for himself. A tough, athletic player, Gordon is the favorite to win the nickel spot, but he could push

for the starting job opposite Antoine Winfield.

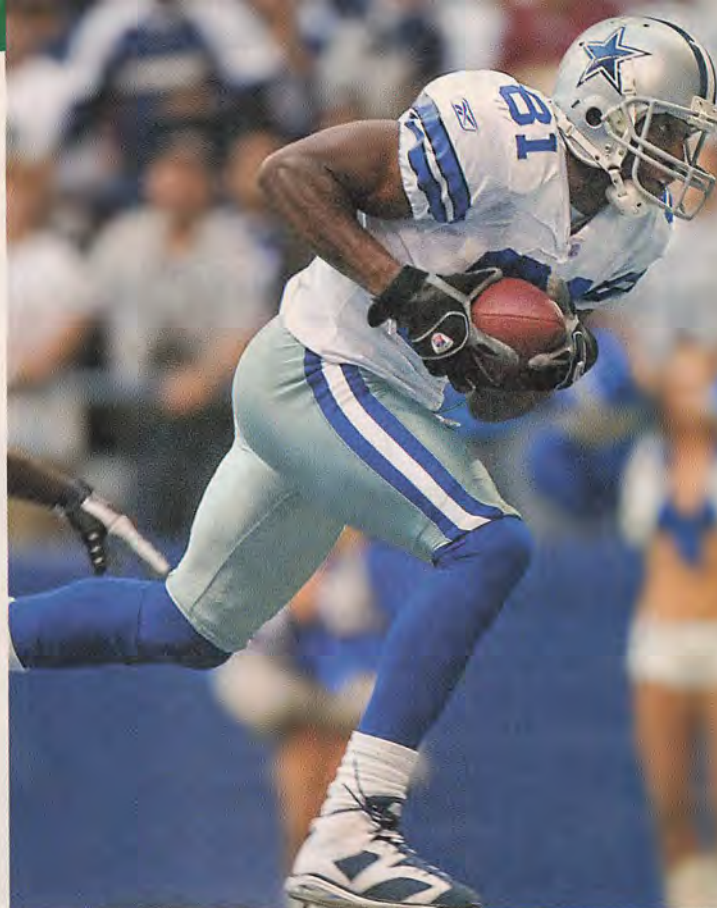
NEW ORLEANS Jonathan Goodwin's transition to starting center is going smoothly. The team let Jeff Faine leave as a free agent because of its confidence in Goodwin (6-3, 318), who has the intelligence and instincts to make the line calls.

NEW YORK Free-agent pickup Renaldo Wynn strengthens depth on the defensive line. Though he has never put up big sack numbers, Wynn is a capable run stopper and can give the Giants quality snaps inside or out. He also serves as insurance in case LE Michael Strahan retires.

PHILADELPHIA After an injury-riddled 2007, FS Brian Dawkins, 34, is back in top shape. He isn't stumbling out of his breaks or having problems with cramps, issues that persisted early last season. He has lost a step over the years, but he's still a punishing hitter.

ST. LOUIS The team has moved Richie Incognito from right guard to center, where he'll compete against Brett Romberg. Incognito started 12 games at center in 2006 and generally played well, though he was erratic with shotgun snaps. He is bigger and more physical than Romberg.

SAN FRANCISCO The 49ers are experimenting with using RE Justin Smith at outside linebacker in their 3-4. In workouts, he has



Owens is 34, but the Cowboys don't mind paying him big money as long as he continues racking up 1,000-yard receiving seasons.

been rushing the passer from both outside linebacker spots. Coach Mike Nolan thinks Smith has the motor and athleticism to line up at many positions.

SEATTLE The team is going to move rookie DE Lawrence Jackson inside on nickel downs during workouts. Jackson also slid inside at USC, and the Seahawks' coaches know he can handle the pounding there. He has the quickness and explosiveness to be a disruptive pass rusher.

TAMPA BAY Scouts contend WLB Derrick Brooks' skills are deteriorating, but there is little evidence of that. Brooks, 35, is not quite as fast as he was in his prime, but he still makes plays all over the field. He has wisely agreed to play 10 or 12 fewer snaps per game this season so he can maintain a high level of effectiveness.

WASHINGTON The rookie wide receivers are making clear progress during OTAs. Malcolm Kelly is showing the ability to get behind corners and stretch the field. Devin Thomas has made some nice catches in traffic but still is getting used to running routes from different sides of the formation.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Sean Jensen; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Matt Barrows; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

Sorry, rest of the basketball-playing world, Team USA has Beijing in the bag.

Go ahead and call it a dream team

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

Jerry Colangelo can see the end. His three-year mission to reclaim Olympic gold for USA basketball is about 10 weeks from completion. A minicamp in Las Vegas at the end of June will be followed by a three-week break before the team reconvenes in Vegas for five days, flies to China for two exhibitions and arrives in Beijing on August 6, two days before the opening ceremonies and four days before its opener against China.

"I'm pumped," says Colangelo, Team USA's managing director. "I feel really good, comfortable, with what we've accomplished so far. It's time to close the deal."

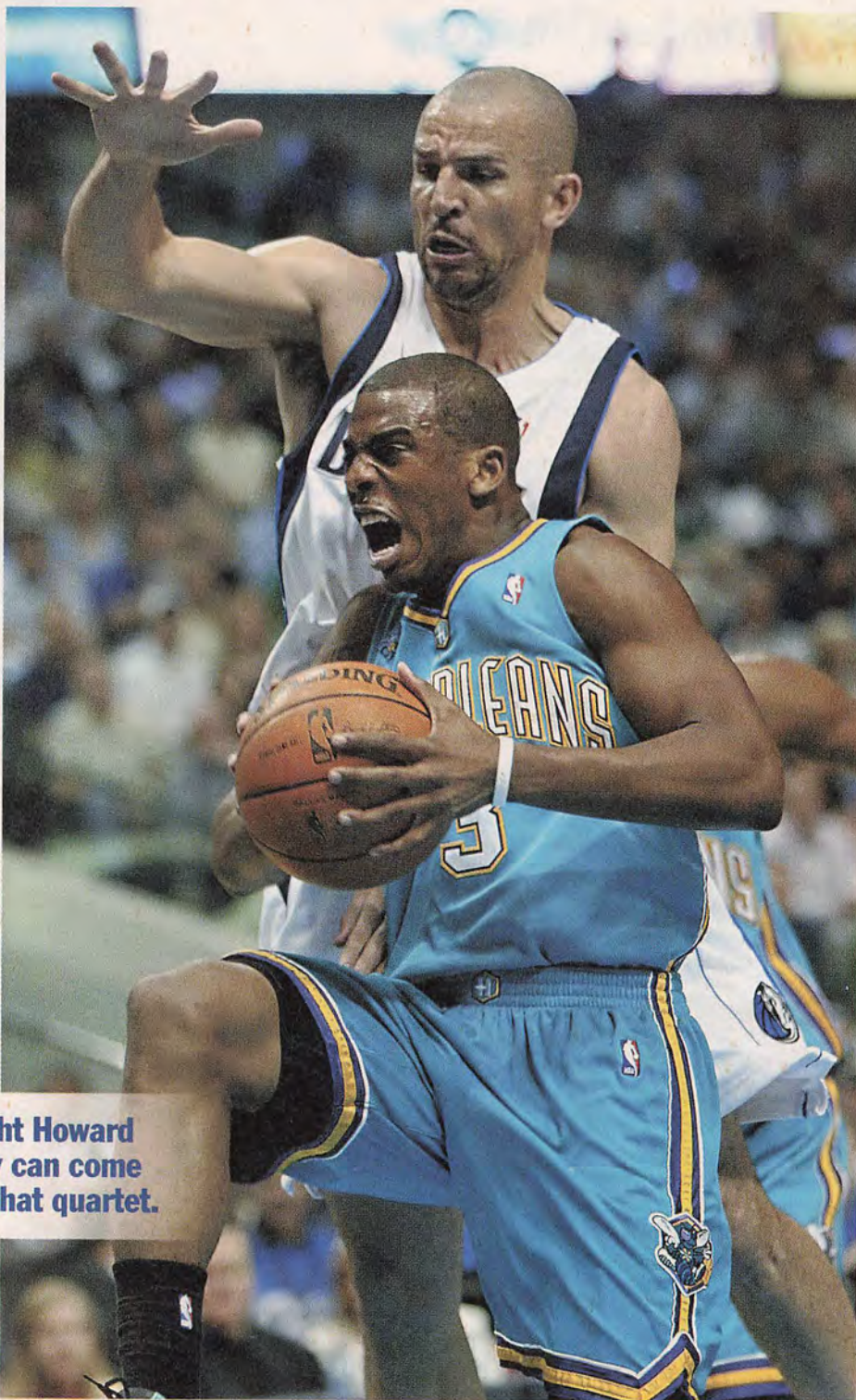
Before the last leg of the journey begins, there's still a small matter to be addressed: Deciding who will be on the 12-man roster that makes the trip. This has been a problem in recent Olympics with American NBA stars having to decide between an offseason of rest and what essentially is a no-win commitment. Lose at the Olympics and they're ripped across the land. Win and everyone yawns. In 2004, most of the top players chose rest, and the result was an embarrassing bronze medal.

But the challenge of picking a roster has been much different this time around for the Team USA brain trust led by Colangelo and coach Mike Krzyzewski. This time, deciding who *won't* go is the tough part. Because Colangelo was so convincing in getting top players to make

Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Dwight Howard and Carmelo Anthony—no country can come close to matching the firepower of that quartet.

a three-year commitment to USA Basketball, he now faces some difficult decisions about which players to leave at home.

"It's a high-class problem to have," Colangelo says. "I'd rather have it this way than having to pull players onto the court



The fast-rising Paul plus the battle-tested Kidd equals a solid point guard situation for Team USA.

as they had to do in 2004."

The team, which likely will be announced sometime during The Finals, may be the best to represent the United States since the original Dream Team. Colangelo wisely has not set out to assemble a squad of All-Stars. His goal has been to assemble the best team with the right mix of superstars and role players. The result will be a roster without an obvious weakness that is certain to be favored in Beijing.

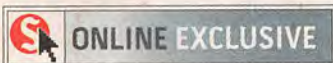
Start with the stars: Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Dwight Howard and Carmelo Anthony. No country can come close to matching the firepower of that quartet. If you thought Anthony's off-court adventures would hurt his status, relax. The team's leading scorer the past two summers remains in good standing with USA Basketball.

Though Chris Paul has emerged as the game's best point guard, Jason Kidd is expected to remain the starter at the Olympics. Colangelo says Kidd is a favorite because of his knack for making the right pass at the right time. Plus, he brings this impressive stat: an undefeated record in international competition. Paul struggled defending bigger Greek guards during the 2006 World Championships and may have to split time as the backup with Deron Williams. Like Kidd, Williams is big and strong enough to thrive in physical international play. The odd man out likely will be Chauncey Billups, who could use time off to recover from a hamstring injury that bothered him during the Eastern Conference finals.

Dwyane Wade, close to full strength after rehabbing his injured left knee, has the makings of a pretty nice sixth man. Colangelo was concerned about Wade's status as recently as last month, telling reporters that Wade looked about "80 percent." Colangelo's concerns have been alleviated since then by reports out of Chicago, where Wade has been working with trainer Tim Grover.

Even if Amare Stoudemire decides to skip the tournament to rest his knees, which looked more probable than possible last week, the team will not lack quality big men. Carlos Boozer and Chris Bosh can bring plenty of scoring, and Tyson Chandler adds defense and rebounding. One of the three likely will end up as an alternate depending on how Colangelo fills out the roster with role players. The leading candidates for those spots are Michael Redd (outside shooting) and Tayshaun Prince (defensive versatility).

On one hand, leaving behind an All-Star such as Boozer or Bosh won't be easy. But on the other, Colangelo can't go wrong. Either player would help complete the mission. **SN**



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INSIDE DISH

Why the NBA should not put out its draft guide 'til after it measures the prospects: Kansas State SF **Michael Beasley** is listed at 6-10 but checked in at 6-7 (6-8½ in shoes) for the league's official measurements in Orlando. Will 3 inches hurt his status as the expected first or second pick? "He'll still go No. 2," says one personnel executive. Says another: "When you start quibbling over an inch or so, you're usually looking for a reason not to draft the guy." UCLA PF **Kevin Love** hoped to measure in at 6-9, and he did—thanks to shoes that added 1¾ inches to his official height, 6-7¾. Love, who weighed about 270 pounds when the college season ended, checked in at 255 but with an unimpressive 13 percent body fat. He should still go in the lottery because his athleticism graded better than some expected during agility testing. Stanford C **Brook Lopez**, considered a top five pick, impressed scouts by coming in at 6-11¼ and 258 pounds without shoes. "He's big, and he's fit," says the personnel exec. Another big who turned heads was Nevada C **JaVale McGee**, who measured 6-11, 241 sans shoes, with a 7-6 wingspan. ➤ The Blazers continue to go slow with C **Greg Oden** (microfracture surgery). They are not allowing him to join a



Beasley isn't quite as tall as he looks.

squad of young players training against the Olympic team in late July. Two other Blazers, SG **Brandon Roy** and PF **LaMarcus Aldridge**, are expected to play, as are draft prospects Beasley and Memphis PG **Derrick Rose**. ➤ Keeping restricted free-agent F **Carl Landry** will be a challenge for the Rockets. He is in line for a three-year deal for between \$25 million and \$30 million, which probably would force the Rockets to pay the luxury tax. Landry's first choice, however, is to stay in Houston. ➤ Give Cavaliers assistant G.M. **Chris Grant** credit for recognizing a good situation when he has one. The up-and-coming exec turned down the Hawks' general manager job not only because of Atlanta's less-than-stable ownership situation but because he believes in the direction of the Cavaliers. He does not sound like someone too worried about losing SF **LeBron James** in two years.

speedreads

We're about to find out just how different Gilbert Arenas really is. If he opts out of his contract as he keeps insisting he will, he likely will be the only big-salary player to do so. Baron Davis, Shawn Marion and Allen Iverson seem wise enough to keep the money they are due to receive next season and shop for a long-term deal later, when more teams are expected to be in position to throw out mega money.

Dwyane Wade says there's nothing to the rumors that the Heat may be shopping him to his hometown Bulls. Too bad for the Heat. A surgically repaired left knee, a surgically repaired left shoulder and a big contract are not a good mix.

Number that counts: 26.7

The increase in 3-pointers attempted per game this season from 1986-87, the last time the Lakers and Celtics met in The Finals. This season, the league average was 36.2 attempts and 36.2 percent made. Twenty-one seasons ago: 9.5 and 30.1. Why such a disparity? "Better coaching," says the Magic's Stan Van Gundy, adding that NBA coaches learned from watching college coaches use the 3-pointer to help less talented teams level the playing field.

What about the difference in percentages? Wasn't shooting supposed to be better back then? "I'm not so sure about that," Van Gundy says. "These guys today are so good." Will the attempts continue to rise? Van Gundy shrugs. "Coaches want layups, free throws and open 3-pointers."

If you doubt it, check out the tryout roster for the U-18 team.

The USA Basketball logo is back in vogue

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

Kobe Bryant, LeBron James and Carmelo Anthony haven't completed the assignment of bringing an Olympic gold medal back to the country that once owned the sport of basketball. They must play some games in China to get that done. But a covert part of their mission already has been accomplished.

They've made the USA Basketball logo on their jerseys as cool as the swooshes or stripes on their sneakers.

"The high school kids have a little more knowledge about the direction USA Basketball is going," says Scout.com recruiting analyst Dave Telep. "When they see big-time NBA players being a part of the program, it has to have trickled down a little bit."

Next month, as the Olympians are preparing for their assault on Beijing, the United States will field a team in the U-18 FIBA Americas Championship, a qualifier for the U-19 World Championship scheduled in 2009. Many elite high school prospects, including scoring machine Kenny Boynton of Miami and burgeoning New York legend Lance Stephenson, have committed to trying out for the 12-man squad that will travel to Argentina. Those making the team will miss out on most of the big shoe camps and tournaments on the July recruiting circuit.

Getting kids to pick international competition over the summer circuit hasn't always been an easy battle to win, which is why USA Basketball chose not to fight it last time around. As host of the 2006 U-18 tournament, the Americans were allowed to pick the dates—and scheduled the games in June, before all that recruiting folderol began.

The last time the United States had to field a U-18 team for competition that conflicted with the July evaluation period, key members of the roster were about to begin their freshman college seasons. Anthony was on his way to Syracuse, Chris Bosh to Georgia Tech, Deron Williams and

Dee Brown to Illinois.

This year's trials list includes nine soon-to-be collegians. However, the majority of really intriguing names are from the class of 2009. Ten of Scout.com's top 30 prospects accepted invitations.

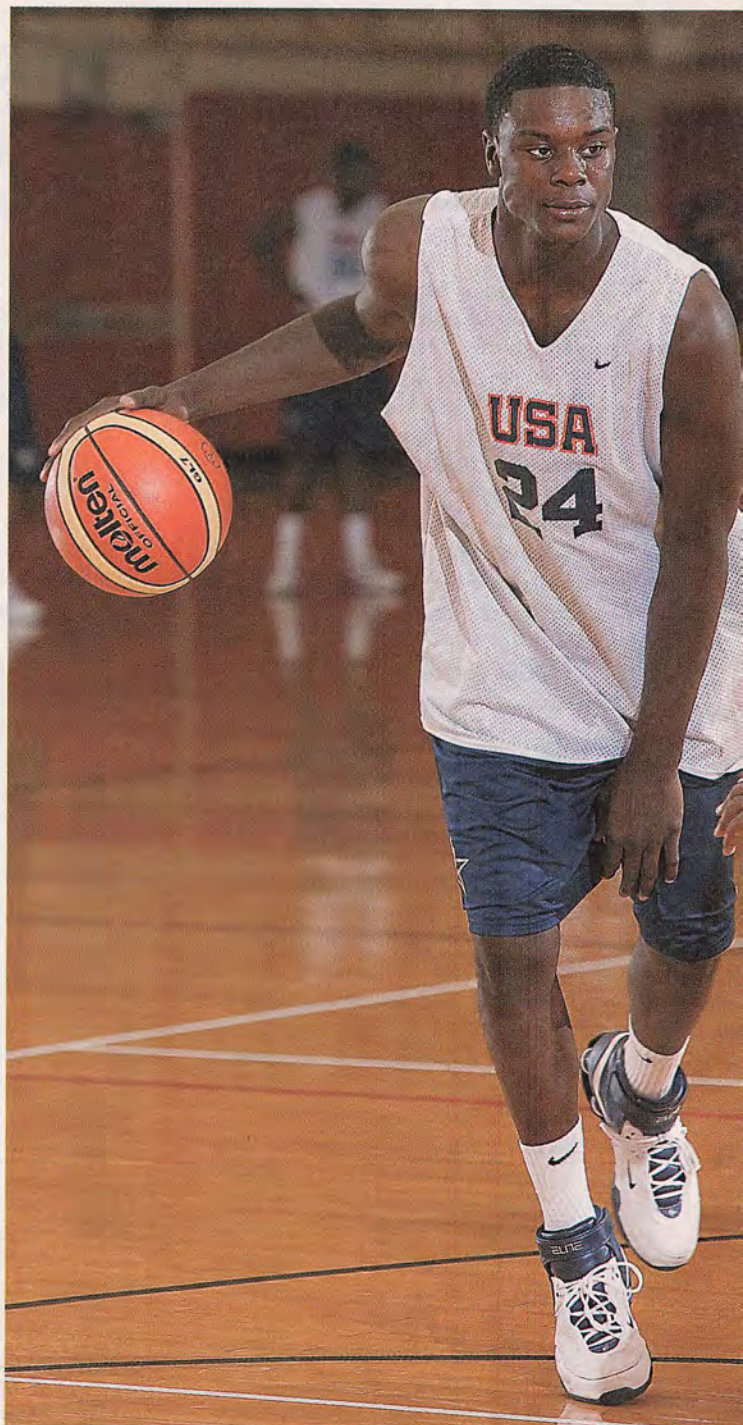
"We're pleasantly surprised," USA Basketball executive Sean Ford says. "It's a little different than it's been in past years. We invite a lot of kids thinking that a lot are going to turn it down, but we didn't have to go to our alternate list at all."

There's something else at play: College coaches don't mind getting their committed players away from competitors who might start poaching.

Some at USA Basketball credit Ford with getting to work early on this project. He sent out 40 invitations in March, aware that many of the top incoming college freshmen would pass because of summer school and the colleges' emphasis on getting their academic progress reports in good shape.

He was surprised, though, to find that some 2009 prospects had bounced around so much playing spring club tournaments that they wanted to make this team to bring some sanity to their summer schedules. The U.S. team will go through tryouts in Washington, D.C., train there and then depart directly for Argentina for the July 14-18 event.

Ford believes the acceleration of the recruiting



Making the squad would mean missing most of the shoe camps and tournaments on the recruiting trail, but Stephenson is giving it a go.

process might be a factor in the increased player interest. Eight of the participating class of '09 players already have committed, and their college coaches naturally might be pushing the idea of working with such excellent coaches as Bob McKillop of Davidson, John Thompson of Georgetown and Anthony Grant of VCU.

Ford didn't say this, but I can: College coaches also don't mind getting their committed players

off the circuit and away from competitors who might take the opportunity to start poaching.

USA Basketball showed excellent timing in selecting McKillop to be head coach. He agreed in January to take the assignment. As the result of Davidson's run to the Elite Eight, Ford has received enthusiastic reaction from players or family members asking who'll be in charge of the team.

International basketball generally is not as prominent in the United States as in many other nations. That's partly because victory always seemed a given in the past and also because FIBA does a lousy job working with American television to expose its events.

If American players are going to wear the USA initials in international competition, though, it certainly is better if they do their best. The surest avenue in that direction is to field the best team—and the core of that endeavor is involving as many of the best players as possible.

Kobe is too old to be eligible, but he'll still make a difference. **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Mike DeCourcy catches up with the Atlantic 10's new commissioner, Bernadette McGlade, at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

This may be my last statement about North Carolina point guard Ty Lawson before he disappears onto some NBA bench: The Tar Heels can better afford to lose him to the draft than shooting guard Wayne Ellington. Lawson is fast with the ball but often takes it nowhere in particular. He isn't exceptional as a distributor or shooter. If Bobby Frasor's knee is healthy, the Heels might be just fine.

Does anyone understand the fuss over the NBA's shoeless height measurements of draft prospects? Nobody plays in bare feet. And the listed heights of players already in the league generally are their "with shoes" measurements. So the measuring tape says Michael Beasley is 6-7 without sneakers, 6-8½ with. They'll need calculators to count up his rookie year points and rebounds.

You know what would make the new job even better for incoming Atlantic 10 commissioner Bernadette McGlade? If there really were only 10 teams. The conference would be much stronger if she could dump four weaklings overboard. (Sorry, but she can't.)

>INSIDE DISH

Texas G.A.J. Abrams did not earn an invitation to the NBA predraft camp but was in no hurry to pull his name from the early-entry list because he was asked to perform some individual workouts. Abrams visited the Golden State Warriors last week and has another tryout scheduled for this week. In the likely event he does return to the Longhorns, Abrams is expected to line up at point guard and replace departed All-American D.J. Augustin. His coaches consider Abrams an excellent passer and believe he can excel at running a team—without sacrificing his ability to score. Before Augustin arrived two seasons ago, Abrams played a good bit of point guard as a freshman and averaged 3.0 assists in just 21.2 minutes per game. > Here's why Florida will remain a power despite missing the 2008 NCAA Tournament: The lure of coach Billy Donovan's program is so strong that he was able to get a gifted assistant coach from the ACC for the second straight year. Donovan plucked Shaka Smart, one of the fastest-rising young coaches in the business, from the Clemson staff one year after getting Rob Lanier from Virginia. Add in veteran defensive specialist Larry Shyatt and Florida has a coaching staff equal to any in Division I. > Smart's departure leaves a hole in Oliver Purnell's Clemson staff, but expect Purnell to elevate director of operations Josh Postorino to that position. Postorino is a hard worker who served under Purnell at Dayton and also was an assistant for Ron Jirsa at Marshall. > West Virginia coach Bob Huggins is excited about the offensive potential 6-8 freshman SF Devin Ebanks will bring, especially with the near certainty that star F Joe Alexander will remain in the draft. The Mountaineers will need scoring, and Huggins believes Ebanks can be effective not only from the perimeter but also occasionally in the post. "He can go down and shoot over the top of smaller guys,"



If Abrams returns, the Longhorns will have a player who can handle the ball and run a team.

Huggins says. WVU won't have to rely entirely on Ebanks to propel the offense. SG Alex Ruoff and athletic F Da'Sean Butler averaged 26.7 points combined last season. The Mountaineers aren't done recruiting, though. Huggins says they need another big man and is confident the team will land one. > Although it has become increasingly rare, there still is such a thing as a sleeper in basketball recruiting. Washington landed a commitment for its 2009 class from 6-4 SG C.J. Wilcox of Pleasant Grove, Utah, who was being recruited mostly by the big in-state schools until the Huskies spotted him nailing 3-pointers in the Kingwood Classic two months ago in Houston. Wilcox proved throughout that tournament that he wasn't a one-game wonder, and UW offered a scholarship. It was fortuitous for the Huskies that Wilcox played at Kingwood because he doesn't travel the recruiting circuit much and might not play anywhere during the July evaluation period.

All-world

Tim Tebow has captured the eyes and ears of people at home and across the globe since winning the Heisman Trophy *By Matt Hayes*

This is where life imitates ... what exactly? What began two years ago with a quirky jump-pass in a college football game has evolved into this extraordinarily surreal life: communicating with heads of state, preaching to prisoners and, yes, circumcising children in a Third World country.

All in one offseason.

Tim Tebow won the Heisman Trophy in December, the first sophomore to do so. In the six months since, Florida's iconic 20-year-old quarterback has traveled more than 15,000 miles to be honored by 15 organizations in nine states. A devout Christian, he has spread the gospel all over the country in various speaking engagements—and as a missionary in the Philippines and Croatia.

He has corresponded with the president of the United States, and presidential candidates have asked for his support in campaigning. Next month, he'll travel to Thailand on yet another mission of hope. Meanwhile, he finished this term with a 3.68 grade-point average. Played a little football, too.

"God gave me this gift for a reason," Tebow says. "There's a sense of purpose in everything I do. It's not me in control; He is. There's a great amount of comfort knowing that."

A peek into Tebow's overloaded offseason:



Dec 9, 2007

Dear Tim,
 Congratulations on winning
 the Heisman Trophy. How
 important. I appreciated your
 mission as stated in your
 speech: Faith, family, academics,
 and sport. If your missions
 to allow the ability to
 shine brightly, it worked.
 I appreciate the love and pride
 that your parents obviously
 felt last night. Please give
 them my best.
 Sincerely, *Barack Obama*

To Mr. Heisman from Mr. President

December 9, 2007: The day after Tebow wins the Heisman, President Bush sends him a handwritten letter congratulating him on his season and his spiritual convictions. Tebow responds with a handwritten letter.

Win with Tim! Win with Tim!

January 2008: Still don't believe in the power of Tebow? Representatives from both political parties court him to campaign with them during Florida's presidential primaries. Tebow doesn't choose sides but hasn't ruled it out altogether.

Nor has he ruled out—deep breath, everyone—a political career after his playing days are over.

"I didn't feel it was right to publicly show support right now," Tebow says. "I am conservative. I am interested in politics, I pay attention. But there's too much on my plate right now. That may be something that comes in the future."



Tebow showed the right touch during his late-April stop at the Florida House of Representatives, which honored him for winning the Heisman—as did UF (below).

The awards circuit

January, 10-13: Walter Camp Weekend, New Haven, Conn. Darren McFadden wins the big prize, but Tebow is honored as a first-team All-American.

February, 17-19: Davey O'Brien Award, Fort Worth, Texas.

March, 6-8: Maxwell Award, Atlantic City, N.J.

April 1: Sullivan Award, New York City.

"I haven't really had a chance to sit back and take it all in," Tebow says. "The awards, the people I met, the honor of being chosen. I'm humbled by it all."

Spring break: Mission in the Philippines

March 8-16: Tebow was born in the Philippines. His parents, Bob and Pam, are missionaries there through the Bob Tebow Evangelistic Association, and Tim returns on annual missions.

This time, in an impoverished village outside General Santos City, he was asked by doctors to help perform minor surgeries—including circumcisions and the removal of cysts—because of the lack of medical personnel in the village.

And yes, there was actual cutting involved.

"You don't have time to be nervous," Tebow says. "Those kids need you."

Spring football game

April 12: Spring practice ends, and the university honors Tebow with a sign on the façade of Ben Hill Griffin Stadium signifying his Heisman Trophy. The sign is next to a plaque for Danny Wuerffel, Florida's 1996 Heisman winner and Tebow's boyhood hero.

Tebow plays in front of 61,000 fans at the spring game, and the offense—with freshman Chris Rainey asserting himself at running back—looks better than ever.

First and 15

April 13: Tebow organizes a First and 15 powder puff football tournament with the university sororities to raise money for orphans in Florida and around the world. The tournament raises nearly \$10,000. "It's not really about the money," Tebow says. "It's about raising awareness."

Bringing hope to prisoners

April 19: In his first free Saturday since December, Tebow visits two Florida prisons and preaches the gospel. The sports information department at Florida has received well over 1,000 speaking requests for Tebow from all kinds of organizations, including many from prisons in Florida, Georgia, Texas, New England and the West Coast.

"If you responded to each one, it would consume your day," says Florida publicist Zack Higbee, who estimates he speaks with Bob Tebow "at least once a day" to coordinate Tim's requests. "Tim doesn't say no, but the reality is he can't possibly do more than a small amount of them."

The power of ministry

May 28: Tebow speaks to more than 2,500 people during a youth rally at Bradford County High's football stadium in Starke, Fla. "Sometimes, the power of God is overwhelming," he says.

The lunch break

June 3: Tebow speaks to Matt Hayes, eats a meatball sub. "Things are finally starting to slow down a bit," Tebow says. "I haven't had a meatball sub in a long time, and it tastes good."





EXPOSURE

Game, sunset, match

By the time the sky over Alex Box Stadium was putting the rouge in Baton Rouge, La., last Saturday, UC Irvine was well on its way to an 11-5 victory over LSU in NCAA baseball super regional play. The College World Series opens this Saturday in Omaha, Neb.

Photo by Crystal LoGiudice / US Presswire

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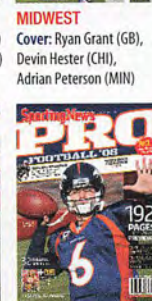
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